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**“King Kong, Bigger Than Cape Town”:  
A History of a South African Musical**

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**“King Kong, Bigger than Cape Town”:  
A History of a South African Musical**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

*For my parents because without them,  
I literally would not be here.*

**“King Kong, Bigger Than Cape Town”:  
A History of a South African Musical**

Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

Tyler David Fleming, Ph.D.

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This dissertation analyzes the South African musical, *King Kong*, and its resounding impact on South African society throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. A “jazz opera” based on the life of a local African boxer (and not the overgrown gorilla from American cinema), *King Kong* featured an African composer and all-black cast, including many of the most prominent local musicians and singers of the era. The rest of the play’s management, including director, music director, lyricist, writer and choreographer, were overwhelmingly white South Africans. This inter-racial collaboration was truly groundbreaking in a nation where apartheid was officially enacted a little over a decade prior to *King Kong*’s 1959 debut. Relatively apolitical in its message, *King Kong* proved accessible to South African audiences regardless of race or background, and became overwhelmingly lauded as an endeavor that all of the country could enjoy and cherish. The musical successfully toured South Africa’s major

metropolises, often to sold-out crowds. Its domestic success later spurred a tour of Britain in 1961, making it the first major South African theatrical production to be staged abroad. Due to the multi-racial efforts behind *King Kong*, its success and the high quality of its performers, the musical initiated a new era in South African music and theatre for decades to come.

Despite being based around *King Kong*, this dissertation contextualizes the production, as it uses *King Kong*'s creation, development and legacies to further analyze larger themes within South African and global histories. Each chapter, as a result, examines the evolution of the musical from the life story of the boxer from which the play is based, the musical's making and tour of South Africa, the play's 1961 tour of the United Kingdom, the experiences of the black casts in exile, and the failure of the play's 1979 remake. By examining the play, its cast, and their collective legacies both in South Africa and further afield, this project complicates our understanding of the Black Atlantic framework by infusing Africans as active participants in these transnational discussions.

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## Introduction

On February 2, 1959, a “jazz opera” entitled *King Kong* premiered at Johannesburg’s University of the Witwatersrand. In relationship to South African society of the 1950s, this musical was a radically novel venture in that it featured an African composer, orchestra and cast while the directorial and organizational teams were overwhelmingly comprised of white South Africans. With its interracial makeup, the musical represented a bold cultural experiment of cooperation and interaction between blacks and whites, and therefore encapsulated precisely the kind of endeavor that the apartheid state frowned upon. This event in itself was a moral victory against apartheid. Even more shocking than its staging, the audience featured a wide spectrum of races, incomes, and political leanings. Perhaps agreeing on nothing else, they overwhelmingly praised and applauded this production. *King Kong*’s success in Johannesburg carried throughout its subsequent tour of the nation’s largest cities. In each location, the reaction by the press and public was widely similar to that of its Johannesburg debut. *King Kong*, as a result, swiftly emerged not just as a theatrical venture, but as a cultural icon and a national treasure to much of the nation. Even today, it is considered a high point of South African culture by the post-apartheid “rainbow” nation.

Yet, this “all-African” but interracial production did not take place during the post-apartheid era. Instead, it occurred roughly a decade after the formal establishment of apartheid in 1948 and thus debuted at a period when South African society itself was deeply divided and compartmentalized along racial lines. Hardly a bastion of racial

harmony, *King Kong*'s birthplace of Johannesburg was no exception. Describing Johannesburg in the 1950s, former editor of *Drum* magazine Anthony Sampson writes, "Seventy years old, and before that nothing. The second biggest city in Africa, and by far the richest. No river, no lake, no self within four hundred miles. Only gold, a mile below it, and everything that gold can buy. Fast, tough, rich, vulgar, new, and proud of it. A million people, half white, half black, one half fearing the other."<sup>1</sup> Rather than a melting pot, the city featured vividly distinct and drastically divided populaces separated under apartheid's laws. As prescribed under such policies, whites disproportionately enjoyed privilege, wealth and opportunity unattainable by the nation's non-European populations. Despite employing black gardeners, maids, drivers, assistants, and various other subordinate roles, white populations remained ignorant of the lives, lifestyles and cultures of their own country's black majority.

Bubbling beyond the bounds of white Johannesburg was an urban African society encapsulated by the African neighborhood of Sophiatown. As opposed to most of the Witwatersrand's African locations and townships, Sophiatown lay within Johannesburg's city limits and it represented a rare exception where Africans could buy and sell property. With the increasing number of Africans migrating to Johannesburg from all over Southern Africa throughout the twentieth century, Sophiatown's culture fused together African cultures; traditions and lifestyles merged with urbanization and Western cultural modes in a manner rarely seen elsewhere in the nation. Sampson writes of Sophiatown:

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005), 4.

Of all the African townships on the Reef, the most lively, important and sophisticated was Sophiatown. It was Limehouse, Chelsea, Tottenham Court Road and Surbiton rolled into one. Dr. Alfred Xuma, Jazzboy, Job Rathebe, Dolly Rathebe, Horror and Can Themba all lived in Sophiatown. The House of Truth, Father Huddleston's Mission, Back o' the Moon and the headquarters of the "Americans" were all in Sophiatown. In its crowded and narrow streets walked philosophers and gangsters, musicians and pickpockets, short-story writers and businessmen. Sophiatown embodied all that was best and worst of African life in towns.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from being popularly referred to as Kofifi and Sof"town, many affectionately referred to it as "Little Harlem."<sup>3</sup> This nickname perhaps was the most apt as the parallels between 1950s Sophiatown and New York's Harlem during the 1920s remained evident. Being a freehold area with a close proximity to Johannesburg's city centre, Sophiatown materialized into the cultural, social, and political hub for Africans on the Reef in a similar manner to that of New York's Harlem for African Americans decades earlier. Such parallels ultimately spurred South African cultural scholar Rob Nixon to deem this period of 1950s Sophiatown as "the Sophiatown Renaissance."<sup>4</sup>

Beginning my research in Johannesburg in October 2005, my proposed project aimed to build on the impressive body of scholarship about the era, such as Nixon's aforementioned examination, David Goodhew's *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown*, and David Coplan's *In Township Tonight!*, and examine "the Sophiatown Renaissance" in a manner similar to David Levering Lewis's treatment of the Harlem Renaissance in *When Harlem was in Vogue*. Grouping musicians, writers, and actors together as artists, I viewed Sophiatown as a fruitful focal point as the majority of

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<sup>2</sup> Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 196-7.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> See "Harlem, Hollywood, and the Sophiatown Renaissance," in Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood*, 11-41.

Johannesburg's African artists possessed firm roots in Sophiatown. My aim was to analyze the collective experience of black artists within Kofifi's orbit and explore how they shaped and reshaped their art throughout the era. Though remaining a period of unprecedented black intellectual and artistic production within Southern Africa, such a project, I quickly realized, was too large and too expansive, as I could not envision when properly to "end" such a project. It seemed that I was attempting to write six dissertations rather than just one.

In hopes of narrowing my task, my focus shifted to the staging of the *King Kong* musical, which Coplan describes as the "ultimate achievement and final flowering of Sophiatown culture".<sup>5</sup> What better way to streamline an interrogation of Sophiatown's musical, theatrical and literary production than to focus on a "jazz opera" that encompassed all three arenas and involved so many of the decade's pivotal figures? Through these efforts surfaced in this dissertation, which proffers a quasi-biography of the *King Kong* musical, its participants and their collective legacies within South African history, I was able to deal with many of the issues that my initial project sought to address. As young scholars apparently are apt to do, I nonetheless underestimated the depth and breadth of knowledge, not to mention time, needed for such an endeavor. As my research further progressed, I realized *King Kong*'s importance went far beyond just music, theatre and literature in Johannesburg or, for that matter, South Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 217.

The story of this particular musical and the energies surrounding its staging raised a number of questions about black South African cultural production and its place within South African society at large. The musical being based on a boxer, for instance, meant one chapter was needed to explore why this particular fighter's story could be chosen as the basis for the musical itself. The literature concerning the sport of boxing in South Africa though remains underdeveloped, and thus this project needed to present a brief interrogation of boxing in black Johannesburg during the 1950s to fully understand why a "jazz opera" could be built around the life of a mediocre Zulu heavyweight. This process proceeded more or less with every chapter. Fortunately, my naïve determination (or perhaps, sheer stupidity) outweighed my lack of wisdom.

Another hurdle that surfaced during the initial conceptual stages of this dissertation centered on whether the story of *King Kong* was one of a "moment" or "movement." As the idea of a dissertation project revolving around one theatrical production initially suggests this project's scope be rather limited, such concerns were entirely valid on the surface. Through my research's progression, nearly every turn of the *King Kong* story from its conceptualization to its performances across both South Africa and Great Britain to the lives of its exiled cast members seemed to epitomize various movements within South African social and cultural histories within the apartheid era. Time and time again, this play's story posed and raised further issues well beyond just the history of a musical production. In response to an apparently minor controversy over the failure to stage the musical in Pretoria, for instance, the *Pretoria News* published a scathing March 1959 editorial that read:

The history of Pretoria's attempts to see 'King Kong' will one day make amusing reading for the school-children of the future. It is, of course, a genuine part of the city's social record, but few will believe that it will ever be regarded as more than a freak of the times...

The historian, therefore, will have much puzzled fun trying to unravel the motives of those who placed every obstacle in its way and finally succeeded in leaving Pretoria kongless but uncontaminated.<sup>6</sup>

Angered by the local government's banning of the proposed performance within Pretoria's city limits (despite significant clamor for the musical by the general public), the newspaper further lamented the conflicting advice concerning the matter received from the Minister of Native Affairs and the Minister of Education, Arts and Science (the former came out in support of its staging in Pretoria, the latter did not). The paper concluded its pro-*King Kong* diatribe by stating: "We believe that the 'King Kong' episode is part of a passing phase. Bantu art and entertainment will grow in volume and value and will come to be accepted as part of South African life. Even Pretoria will one day pay to see it."<sup>7</sup> Moments such as this one convinced me that *King Kong* represented not only a historic moment but also provided a nexus in which various historical movements concluded, overlapped or began. Thus I countered that this play is not simply an important moment to begin a dissertation but offers a nearly ideal topic around which to base a dissertation. This contention will be repeatedly tested across this project, and it is my hope that the reader will accept this approach and my conclusions by the end of this dissertation.

Therefore this dissertation's aims are much broader than merely presenting a history of one theatrical production. By offering a study of *King Kong*, its participants

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<sup>6</sup> "Kongless But Unbowed," *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 21, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> "Kongless But Unbowed," *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 21, 1959.

and their collective legacies, this dissertation argues that this play is emblematic and representative of various currents within South African history, such as efforts at a multi-racial South Africa in the 1950s, exile throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and historical memory. It is through the lens of *King Kong* that I examine such themes, and each chapter examines a different aspect of the nation's social and cultural history in relation to the musical and its performers.

A history of *King Kong* ultimately could have been more focused and concise if this project focused entirely on the musical itself and its impact on South African culture. One of my key aims for this project, however, is that the story of *King Kong* and its performers spilt beyond South Africa's borders by contributing to larger concepts of Africa held throughout the Western world. Hence this work also complicates and furthers our understanding of the black Atlantic framework post-emancipation offered by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. In his now seminal text, Gilroy endeavors "to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps no other cultural form has been historically transmitted across the black Atlantic as jazz music. Initially created by African American musicians, it truly has been disseminated across Latin America, Europe and Africa. Jazz guitarist and scholar Jerome Harris writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1996), 15.



For musicians and audiences in non-American cultures, jazz must almost inevitably be considered a process—first, because members of these communities naturally bring their own musical and cultural backgrounds to bear on the music they make, market, and listen to; and, second, because their distance from the music’s home base is such that it is impractical (if not quixotic) to build a local aesthetic on the approval of canonmakers in the United States. People who live halfway around the world cannot rely on getting the approval of an Art Blakey or Miles Davis or Betty Carter or Wynton Marsalis to confirm their validity of what they do; that validity must, of necessity, be confirmed by the players and audiences in their home areas. Thus it is not surprising that members of these communities search for an essence in jazz that is separate from any living relationship with jazz definers in America.<sup>9</sup>

Joining in this process, black performers across South Africa transformed American jazz music into their own through the creation of musical forms like *kwela* and *marabi*. As scholars like Veit Erlmann, David Coplan, Rob Nixon, Christopher Ballantine and others have effectively demonstrated, black South Africans possess a long history of absorbing, appropriating and assimilating cultural modes that originated from across the Atlantic Ocean, mainly America. By the early 1950s, in particular, American influence in Sophiatown and African society across Johannesburg was evident as one reader once told *Drum*’s Anthony Sampson:

“Ag, why do you dish out that [tribal] stuff, man?” said a man with expansive hair in a floppy American suit, at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre. “Tribal music! Tribal history! Chiefs! We don’t care about chiefs! Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want Duke Ellington, Satchmo, and hot dames! Yes, brother, anything American. You can cut out this junk about kraals and folk tales and Basutos in blankets-forget it! You’re just trying to keep us backward, that’s what! Tell us what’s happening right here, man, on the Reef!”<sup>10</sup>

This reader’s reaction is key to understanding Sophiatown as he essentially demands two things from *Drum*, local happenings on the Rand and news from America, but he frames them as one in the same as if Satchmo and Duke Ellington were creations from Johannesburg’s jazz scene. This incorporation of black American jazz music (in addition

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome Harris, “Jazz on the Global Stage,” in Ingrid Monson, ed., *The African Diaspora: a Musical Journey* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 115-6.

<sup>10</sup> Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 7.

to African American musicals and cinema like *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen Jones*) remains, on the one hand, only one layer of South Africa's interaction with the black Atlantic, and it is my aim to use the history of *King Kong* to broaden Gilroy's framework.

Though Gilroy argues that the Atlantic Ocean and the states bordering it can be viewed as "one single, complex unit of analysis" within historical discussions of "the modern world," he fails to make any adequate attempt at examining Africa's role within this conceptual framework.<sup>11</sup> Rather than participating in these dialogues concerning blackness and modernity, Africa remains on the metaphorical sidelines throughout Gilroy's work (as well as various other analyses dealing with the black Atlantic), with the African diaspora speaking for, to, and about the African continent and its peoples. Instead of dwelling on African appropriations of American or European cultures in South Africa, this project explores the various venues of dialogue accessed across the black Atlantic by the musical and its performers both within and outside the African continent.

The collective story of *King Kong* contains many crisscrossings of both the real Atlantic and the imagined Black Atlantic. This particular focus on *King Kong* and its performers allows for a fruitful exploration of the dynamics behind the cultural, political and personal "give and take" between Africa and the rest of the Black Atlantic. Whereas it details how American jazz and theatrical traditions were appropriated by South Africans in staging this musical, it also demonstrates how South Africans both through this musical and their own individual careers shaped how Africa was received in the West, though mainly Britain, America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Ranging from Harry

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<sup>11</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 15.

Belafonte to Miles Davis to The Rolling Stones to Jack Hylton to Stevie Wonder to Johnnie Dankworth to The Byrds to Dizzy Gillespie to Fela Kuti to Paul Simon, the collective musical journey of the play and its performers touched upon a diverse collection of the world's musicians. Together they significantly shaped jazz, R&B and folk music across the globe and aided in the creation of the World music genre. Thus the collective impact of their careers is extremely significant to popular culture across Europe, Africa and North America of the post-war era. Whether an exception or the norm, *King Kong* and its participants' reach spanned beyond the African side of the Black Atlantic framework, as the musical toured Britain in 1961 and subsequently many of its African cast and band members relocated to Britain and America during the 1960s and 1970s. In essence, it and they personified the "two-way traffic between African cultural forms and the political cultures of diaspora blacks" that Gilroy's work only briefly touches upon.<sup>12</sup> Therefore *King Kong*, its participants and their collective legacies complicate and further augment the conceptual framework of the Black Atlantic.

This quasi-biography is roughly divided into two parts, and each chapter subsequently examines a different layer of the *King Kong* story. The first section examines the three "lives" of *King Kong* from the actual life of Ezekiel "King Kong" Dlamini to the play's creation and staging in South Africa to the production's struggles on London's West End. The second section explores the "afterlives" of *King Kong* and its cast following the musical's 1961 British run by exploring the experiences of the

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<sup>12</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 199.

exiled African performers in Britain, America and sub-Saharan Africa as well as the colossal failure of the 1979 remake of *King Kong* in Johannesburg.

The first chapter, entitled “Marvelous Muscles,” examines the actual life of Ezekiel “King Kong” Dlamini, a Zulu heavyweight fighter who kills his girlfriend and later himself whose life forms the basis of the musical. His life story posed a compelling idea for the theatre since his life encapsulated both the triumphs and the tragedies of Johannesburg’s townships. Though positioning much of my analysis within Gilroy’s transnational framework, this chapter examines the sport of boxing on the local level of black Johannesburg throughout the 1950s. During this decade, black boxers occasionally emerged as significant folk heroes and idols within the African townships, and Dlamini may be the most fascinating case study of this phenomenon. By examining Dlamini’s life and career as both a boxer and a sheer brute, the chapter establishes not only the place of boxing within black life on the Reef during the 50s, but also demonstrates how one boxer’s life could inspire a “jazz opera” like *King Kong*.

The second chapter explores *King Kong*’s creation and staging across South Africa in 1959. A groundbreaking endeavor never attempted before on such a massive scale, *King Kong* drew from some of South Africa’s most prominent black and white (comprised largely of the city’s Jewish population of both liberal and leftist political leanings) artists on the Rand. It argues that *King Kong* itself hinted at the possibility of a South Africa without apartheid on micro (within the play’s participants and organizers) and macro levels (with its warm reception and wide acceptance across racial lines as well

as the nation). At the same time, the chapter explores how apartheid's norm seeped into this supposed symbol of multi-racialism.

The next chapter moves away from South Africa as it follows the musical on its tour of Britain. It argues that though the cultural climate in the United Kingdom seemingly indicated that *King Kong* would be warmly received on London's West End, the reality on the ground proved the opposite. In essence, the standards and performative climate of Britain were drastically different than those in South Africa. Rather than appreciating the groundbreaking nature of an "all-African musical" coming from apartheid South Africa, they judged on their terms and compared to plays that also had been recently staged on the West End. Whereas in South Africa, where the mere event of an "all-African musical" taking place within the apartheid era was basically enough to appease most audience members, the play failed to live up to the expectations and preconceptions of both the British public and press. Instead many considered the production amateurish, naïve, lackluster and clunky. This chapter highlights how the nation's preconceived notions of South Africa impeded *King Kong*'s ability to recreate the success that it garnered at home in 1959.

The fourth and fifth chapters examine the experience of the black *King Kong* cast and orchestra members who chose to live in exile in Britain or America. Through analyzing the experiences of those exiled in Britain in comparison to those who wound up in America, I demonstrate the importance of place and timing for exiled South African performers. The performative climates in Britain and America were quite different, and the experiences of British and American *King Kong* exiles were consequently quite

disparate. Chapter four argues that the cast and band members that remained in London following *King Kong*'s 1961 tour typically struggled to effectively carve a niche for themselves within the realms of either music or acting. Instead, they gradually found "everyday" jobs with "everyday" lives and faded into the growing South African exile community within Great Britain.

Chapter five examines the lives of the former *King Kong* members who relocated to the United States. It argues that those exiles who surfaced in America faced an almost opposite fate. Instead of floundering, they flourished and surfaced within American mainstream music (or just on the cusp of it). Due to the size of America's black population, these performers found the United States to be a more fertile environment for black South African singers and musicians than Europe. With America's increased interest in African cultures as well as the anti-apartheid movement, these performers were widely welcomed and hoisted up as emblems of modern African sophistication. With these points made, their collective experience in America too came with its own unique set of challenges. American audiences desired to hear African music that was recognizably or "authentically" African (such as West African drumming or songs sung in African languages). For South African singers and musicians whose routines back in South Africa consisted of attempting to sound like Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, these demands were difficult to meet. In order to better meet the demands of Western audiences and survive within the American music industry, these exiles embarked on a process of incorporating musical traditions from across Africa and the diaspora into their own routines. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how this "Africanization" caused

these exiles to become drawn into anti-apartheid politics and later often relocate to sub-Saharan Africa altogether between the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The final chapter analyzes the 1979 restaging of *King Kong*. Expecting to rejuvenate the preeminent classic of South African theatre, the organizers sought to recapture the warm receptions that greeted the 1959 production. In revitalizing the musical for the 1970s audiences, the group imported Tony Award-winning African American playwright Joseph A. Walker among other foreigners to reshape this now seminal South African musical. Unlike its 1959 predecessor, this version, for all intents and purposes, flopped. Its run lasted only a few days, lost nearly all of its investment, and suffered from various other difficulties. This chapter argues that the politics, shifts in black South African theatre, *King Kong*'s powerfully pervasive legacy within South African society, and subsequent shifts in tastes by both black and white audiences in addition to the Walker-initiated alterations caused the musical to flop. Additionally, the tragic outcome of this remake offers further insights into the popular imagining of Africa between the continent and the African diaspora.

In sum, the history of this particular South African “jazz opera” is one of ranging importance, as it includes various personal, religious, political, racial, economic, and cultural legacies. While the play itself presents the life of a boxer, the history behind the theatrical production, its staging, its cast and its management offers much more. The history of *King Kong* and those associated with it encompasses black and white, Jew and Gentile, Africa and abroad, art and industry, politics and the apolitical, success and failure, home and exile, departure and return. In other words, the history of *King Kong* is

inherently and uniquely one thing: South African. For this historian “of the future,” it is indeed a tremendous privilege to be able to tell its tale.



## Chapter One

### **“Marvelous Muscles”: Black Boxing on the Reef during the 1950s and the History of King Kong, the Heavyweight**

Over the past four decades, scholarly examinations concerning the role of sports within South African society have grown a great deal and furthered our collective understanding of South African sporting cultures and their wider impact on South African society.<sup>1</sup> Despite these gains, the field only pays cursory attention to boxing. The sport, in short, does not fall into the main scopes of their writings as they focus on the sports that traditionally received more attention in South African society, such as cricket, rugby and soccer. Thus our collective knowledge about boxing—its impact and importance within black communities—remains lacking.<sup>2</sup> This essay seeks to aid in addressing this oversight, but more so it aims to analyze black boxing in the scope of my main project, which is an in-depth examination of the *King Kong* musical, titled after Ezekiel “King Kong” Dlamini, a black boxer in Johannesburg from this era.

Since Ezekiel “King Kong” Dlamini’s prominence as a boxer facilitated his rise to local folk hero, it is vital to understand the place of boxing in South African society and the popularity of boxers during the 1950s before analyzing the larger aim of this dissertation, which is the musical itself. The chapter subsequently provides a

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<sup>1</sup> Studies from the 1960s until the 1980s generally focused on stances taken against apartheid by international sporting organizations or the performance of South African sports on international stages where the country’s racial ideology could be put to the test. After the fall of apartheid, South Africanist scholars are now beginning to reexamine the topic of sports and increasingly focus on South Africa’s hosting of the upcoming 2010 World Cup.

<sup>2</sup> It is my hope that I can further address this topic in a future project.

streamlined examination into the culture of black boxing in South Africa throughout the decades of the 1940s and 1950s while also providing as detailed a biography as possible of the inspiration for the *King Kong* musical. I believe that the reader must fully grasp why a boxer like “King Kong” and the phenomenon surrounding both his career and downfall could inspire the writing of the *King Kong* musical. By providing this biography, one understands why a black heavyweight and murderer could capture the imaginations of South Africans across political, cultural and racial lines. Ultimately, it demonstrates why Dlamini’s untimely and unfortunate life story could be turned into a successful “jazz opera.”

### **The Emergence of Boxing in South Africa**

By the 1950s, boxing was an Africa-wide phenomenon. Nigeria, Senegal and Gold Coast produced major international fighters, and the sport also featured prominently in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique), Kenya and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).<sup>3</sup> Unlike elsewhere in Africa and other sports within South Africa, boxing in South Africa was a major component of leisure and popular culture regardless of race or ethnicity, as Afrikaner, English, African, Indian and Coloured boxers all emerged to

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<sup>3</sup> It appears, however, that interest in boxing throughout the rest of Southern Africa (ie. Portuguese East Africa and Southern Rhodesia) came after its rise to prominence in South Africa, as their boxers were under-skilled when compared to their Union counterparts though it remains unclear whether this spread was either brought back from South Africa by migrant laborers or introduced by South African boxers as they toured and fought in these areas. See “Round and About,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951; Sports Editor, “South African Boxing in 1950,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951; and “Rhodesians Laughed At Boxer Because He Skipped,” *The World* (Johannesburg), February 9, 1957.

prominence between the 1930s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> By the 1950s, however, African boxers were beginning to dominate the nation's non-white divisions (Indian professional boxers, for instance, became more and more rare) and even rival their white countrymen who already made a significant impact on the international scene.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the African populace came to accept and welcome the sport as their boxers improved and achieved greater success.

For Africans, boxing, particularly international boxing, represented a rare arena where blacks could not only compete with whites but also thrive (not to mention earn a decent paycheck). Images of international black boxers, such as Nigeria's Hogan Bossey, Gold Coast's Ray Ankarah and Attu Clotey and America's Joe Louis, Jack Johnson and Henry Armstrong filtered through South Africa as the black press often spotlighted the success of these athletes. Johannesburg's African population, consequently, repeatedly recalled their images as heroic figures in black achievement. Realizing how these fighters were used by their own populations as examples of racial advancement, local South African audiences raised up these foreign boxers as black heroes. Efforts were even made to bring certain boxers, such as Bossey, to fight in the Union of South Africa, though each was stymied by visa problems or with denials of entry permits (perhaps demonstrating the South African state's belief that such boxers

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<sup>4</sup> The country's first Chinese professional boxer, Sidning Lou, even debuted in 1956. See Usiyazi, "Talk of the World," *The World* (Johannesburg), March 14, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> "Last of the Indian Champs," *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1956.

could rally black South Africans).<sup>6</sup> Their collective success, particular against white opponents, inspired local South Africans to take up the sport in hopes of international fame, fortunes and the opportunity to fight (literally) for racial equality. Thus, for Africans in the Union, the sport of boxing grew as it became a global tool in the racial uplifting of black peoples around the globe.

Besides a source of black pride, many thought the sport introduced vital life skills to young men and boys, and this belief aided in the sport's growth. Many believed it instilled discipline, taught self-defense, and channeled youthful mischievousness into a positive outlet. In many ways these beliefs were validated by comparison to soccer and other popular sports, as boxing often possessed more orderly and well-behaved fans. Local soccer matches routinely ended in riots or scuffles while boxing matches rarely did (though boxing fans often did sneak into bouts).<sup>7</sup> Boxers and boxing fans were known for representing discipline and sportsmanship. As an article in *The World* noted, "Boxers have excelled in sportsmanship. Although both parties often take terrific punishment over many rounds, at the end of that trying time, they shake hands, congratulate each other with a smile; often with their faces covered in blood." The article further continued, "It is high time other sportsmen did likewise..."<sup>8</sup>

Thus in an era of a rapidly growing population in Johannesburg's black spots and of perceived moral panic—rising from urbanization and increasing crime rates—boxing

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<sup>6</sup> These may have been due to an governmental ban of foreign fighters in South Africa. Sources: "Jacob 'Baby Jake' Ntseke," in Jurgen Schadeberge, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Bailey's African Photo Archives, 1987), 155.

<sup>7</sup> "Boxing is a 'free show' for too many people," *The World* (Johannesburg), May 26, 1956.

<sup>8</sup> "About sport-and sportsmanship," *The World* (Johannesburg), March 17, 1956.

became a vehicle to shape unruly boys into respectable young men. Believing that the sport could keep youths out of trouble (both from local gangsters known as *tsotsis* and from becoming *tsotsis* themselves), parents, pastors, teachers and community leaders alike encouraged boys to take up boxing. Joas “Kangaroo” Maoto was initially pushed into the sport by his concerned mother; as he told *Drum*, “All this time my mother was fighting heavily to save me from the creepy claws of the underworld and an idea struck her. Boxing!”<sup>9</sup> The black press echoed similar sentiments. *The World* went as far as to state, “if there were enough [boxing] facilities in the townships for boys clubs many if not all young boys would be curbed from becoming delinquents and criminals,”<sup>10</sup> and *Drum* proclaimed that boxing was “How Men Are Made!”<sup>11</sup> These beliefs were not just abstract thoughts, as many boxers were regular churchgoers and maintained moral lives. Elijah Mokone expressed interest in becoming a “Minister of Religion” after his boxing career ended,<sup>12</sup> Jake Tuli volunteered as a “server” at his church, and many made “a sign of the cross” before matches.<sup>13</sup>

The governmental and missionary establishments too endorsed these ideals, but considered sports in general as beneficial to society and actively promoted various Western sports (i.e. cricket, rugby, boxing, basketball and soccer) by the early twentieth century. Missionary James Dexter Taylor argued in 1929 that “[p]roper and adequate

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<sup>9</sup> “Joas ‘Kangaroo’ Maoto, Welterweight Champ,” in Jurgen Schadeberge, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Bailey’s African Photo Archives, 1987), 152-3.

<sup>10</sup> Caption to photo, *The World* (Johannesburg), December 12, 1956.

<sup>11</sup> “How Men Are Made!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), November 1951.

<sup>12</sup> Elijah Mokone, “I Vow-When My Boxing Days End I Will Become a Minister of Religion,” *The World* (Johannesburg), April 14, 1956.

<sup>13</sup> Usiyazi, “Talk of The World,” *The World* (Johannesburg), January 16, 1956.

provision for native recreation would mean better workers, keener mentally and physically, better citizens less likely to be criminals, better neighbours, less likely to be anti-white, more likely to possess a true sense of community values.”<sup>14</sup> Seemingly endorsing Taylor’s belief that sport could produce “better” residents in 1939, the Sporting division of Johannesburg’s Native Affairs Department established a Boys’ Club in Orlando that featured a boxing ring.<sup>15</sup>

Benefiting from the support of the government, missionaries and community groups, boxing formed initial strongholds in urban areas by the 1920s<sup>16</sup> and became firmly established throughout the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>17</sup> As was typical across the African continent, boxing thrived in urban locales where trainers could choose from a larger pool of talent, and where promoters could draw bigger crowds and thus more money from bouts. Additionally, urbanites possessed greater access to radios, cinemas and the print media (the three main outlets for the dispersal of boxing news), and thus could better keep abreast of boxing both domestically and abroad. As a result, boxing increasingly became identified as a symbol of urban sophistication, and the educated African elite and professional classes adopted a strong interest in it. Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo

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<sup>14</sup> *Report of the National European-Bantu Conference, Cape Town, February 6-9, 1929* (Lovedale Press, Lovedale, 1929), 195-196, citation taken from Alan Gregory Cobley, *Rules of the Game: Struggles in Black Recreation and Social Welfare Policy in South Africa* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1997), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Cobley, *Rules of the Game*, 29-30.

<sup>16</sup> Cities were ultimately where a large percentage of missionary educated Africans migrated to in search of employment.

<sup>17</sup> Ferreiratown’s Frisco Kids Boxing Club was created by Phineas K. Sebiloane, a successful local boxer from the 1920s. See “Promising Boxer,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1951; and Benny Singh, “...And Boxing Makes Three!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), October 1952.

regularly attended bouts (Mandela even trained as a boxer),<sup>18</sup> ANC activist and future Robben Island inmate Robert Resha wrote for *African Sports* (a sports periodical that regularly covered boxing), and Job Richard (JR) Rathebe was a boxing promoter and chairman of the Transvaal Boxing Board in addition to being a local social worker, businessman, community activist, secretary of the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC), member of *Drum*'s board and leader of the "burial society" throughout the 1950s.<sup>19</sup>

With its urban core, the sport could attract not only the educated elite but also illiterate plebeians. In *Rules of the Game: Struggles in Black Recreation and Social Welfare Policy in South Africa*, historian Alan Copley states, "for the former it was 'the noble art'; for the latter it was a rugged part of daily life which could become a route out of poverty for a lucky few."<sup>20</sup> This spanning across class lines is best presented in coloured author Peter Abrahams' autobiography *Tell Freedom* as the sport surfaces twice in the work despite each instance occurring in vastly different settings. Abrahams first mentions boxing when he recalls witnessing an amateur barefisted match taking place on Sixteenth Street in one of Johannesburg's largely Coloured neighborhoods, Vrededorp, in the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> This depiction is far from a scene of refinement and Abraham's description of the event does not bear the image of a "noble" art form referred to by Copley. Yet in the almost converse environment of a missionary school in Pietersburg, Abrahams details

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<sup>18</sup> "Be-Bop Goes To Boxing – S.A. Welterweight Title Fondi Mavuso VS Simon Mbata," in Jurgen Schadeberge, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Bailey's African Photo Archives, 1987), 48; and Todd Matshikiza, "Be-Bop Goes Boxing!," *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1955.

<sup>19</sup> "Job Richard Rathebe," in Jurgen Schadeberge, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Bailey's African Photo Archives, 1987), 94.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Copley, *Rules of the Game*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom: Memories of Africa*, New York (Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 106-7.

his black friends' keen interest in boxing and notes, "These three [schoolboys] were intensely interested in a young man in America [Joe Louis] who was making a name for himself as a prizefighter.... They knew the details of every fight he had been in, the length of time in which he had beaten his opponent. To them he was the most important man in the world, the greatest hero of our time."<sup>22</sup> Thus the reader notices the diverse backgrounds and lifestyles behind the growing number of boxing fans.

Besides representing a meeting ground for both literate and illiterate, another cause for the sport's rise appears to be due to its morphing into a logical and reasonable (though most likely unspoken) compromise between Southern Africa's indigenous stick fighting and the ideals of modernity imposed by Western society and missionaries. In *Laduma!: Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa*, Peter Alegi argues, "Mandela's transition from rural stick fighting to urban boxing captures how agrarian notions of physical prowess, masculine identity, theatrical performance, and martial competition endured in modern sport."<sup>23</sup> Hence the energies from the stick fighting became siphoned into the modern sports, but no sport bears a more striking resemblance to stick fighting than boxing. Both pitted individual opponents whose strength, quickness, strategy and striking techniques ultimately dictated who won a match. Therefore it seems highly likely that this noble art offered a bridge from rural society to increasingly urban lifestyles of black South Africans where pre-colonial traditions could be maintained and enforced albeit in a slightly different format.

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<sup>22</sup> Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*, 264.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Alegi, *Laduma!: Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa* (Durban: University of Kwazulu Natal Press, 2004), 7.



## **The Place of Black Boxing on the Reef**

Organized sports played a key role in African life on the Witwatersrand by the 1930s, and rapidly became accepted in black social orders. Local sports enthusiast, promoter and socialite Dan Twala became the manager of the Bantu Sports Club in 1936, the Pirates soccer team (the eventual South African soccer equivalent to the New York Yankees in their success and nationwide popularity) was started in Orlando in 1939 and the BMSC was now established as a center for many sporting activities. While soccer was the most popular sport amongst Johannesburg's black population by the 1950s, soccer's dominant position as the "national" African sport was far more tenuous than the present day.<sup>24</sup>

African boxing gyms or "stables" sprouted in black spots, such as Sophiatown,<sup>25</sup> and recruits came "pouring in" to local gyms.<sup>26</sup> Though some boxing clubs existed on their own, most were affiliated with larger sporting clubs, groups or organizations; the gym run by Gilbert "KKK" Moloi operated out of a local YMCA,<sup>27</sup> the BMSC opened a boxing club and the Transvaal Association of Non-European Boys' Clubs even created the Transvaal Association of Non-European Amateur and Professional Boxing (TANEAPB). The Transvaal alone possessed a number of clubs and stables including

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<sup>24</sup> "Dan Twala, Mr Sport," in Schadeberg, *The Fifties People*, 119; and "Orlando Pirates, South Africa's Ace Club," in Schadeberg, *The Fifties People*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> "Homicide Hank, Lightweight King," in Schadeberg, *The Fifties People*, 138.

<sup>26</sup> "Recruits are pouring in," *The World* (Johannesburg), March 28, 1956.

<sup>27</sup> "Homicide Hank, Lightweight King," in Schadeberg, *The Fifties People*, 139.

Frisco Kids Boxing Club, Jabavu B.C., Phefeni B.C., Goodwill B.C., Home D. Boxing Club, Jubilee Centre Boxing Club, Blue Mountain Boxing Club and Renegade.<sup>28</sup>

Though drawing smaller crowds than major soccer matches, boxing bouts drew considerable audiences on the Reef.<sup>29</sup> The BMSC's matches routinely drew "good houses" for even "mediocre bills."<sup>30</sup> As the century progressed, both professional matches and amateur tournaments faced unprecedented growth. The TANEAPB staged "about four tournaments a year" by 1951<sup>31</sup> and bouts took place on two Fridays a month at the BMSC by 1955.<sup>32</sup> Matches took place in a variety of places throughout the country, such as the BMSC, the Durban City Hall and, for a period, the Johannesburg City Hall.<sup>33</sup>

As the decade wore on, more and more fans attended boxing matches. On March 17, 1951, a tournament at the BMSC featured twenty bouts and drew a 500-person audience (made up of both white and black men and women).<sup>34</sup> Bouts taking place in Cape Town or Durban could even be watched in local cinemas.<sup>35</sup> Attendance figures only increased as the sport became better organized. Close to 13,000 packed a

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<sup>28</sup> Sports Editor, "Golden City Boxing," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1951.

<sup>29</sup> Boxing tournaments, however, did not automatically turn profits and promoters did lose considerable investments when the boxers did not meet attendance estimates or if a bout was cancelled as they often fronted most of the funds for a fight. On April 6, 1951, Shabane Promotions appears to have lost a sizeable amount as a result of an under-attended match that pitted Transvaal's boxers against fighters from Natal at the BMSC. Though significant that the tournament lost money, it is also important to note that *The African Drum* believed that tournament could have turned a profit had it been held at a location half-way between Johannesburg and Durban rather than in downtown Johannesburg. See "Promoter Lost £300 When Salome Fight Cancelled," *The World* (Johannesburg), August 22, 1956.

<sup>30</sup> "From the Editor's Seat," *African Sports* (Johannesburg), August 1953.

<sup>31</sup> "How Men are Made!" *Drum* (Johannesburg), November 1951.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Maimane, "Boxing goes to the Dance," *Drum* (Johannesburg), August 1955.

<sup>33</sup> *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1951; and "MKenzie Beats National Champ," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1951.

<sup>34</sup> Sports Editor, "Golden City Boxing," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1951.

<sup>35</sup> "Big fight on 'silver screen'," *The World* (Johannesburg), February 18, 1956.

Johannesburg stadium for a Jake Tuli and Pancho Villa match in 1953 (which featured an undercard “[h]eaded by” Dlamini vs. Simon Greb),<sup>36</sup> and Elijah “Ellis Brown” Mokone and David “Slumber” Gogotoya drew 4,000 spectators at Durban’s Allan Ford stadium.<sup>37</sup>

As skill levels improved, local boxers became more competitive abroad and attendance increased, so too did the sport’s coverage in the black press. Coverage often dwarfed that of soccer, and boxing featured prominently and covered extensively throughout *Drum*, *The Bantu World*, *Hi-Note!*, *African Sports* and *Zonk!*, where soccer only received fleeting mentions. Even whites, reading these periodicals to learn about African life, ascertained that boxing was a key facet of black life and leisure.<sup>38</sup> As a result of this coverage many prominent boxers were probably better known than the Union’s top soccer players, and also became depicted as sex symbols or “beef-cakes” for female readers.<sup>39</sup>

These high profiles led to the appearance of many boxers in advertisements for various products, which only further enhanced their visibility. Boxers, as a result, materialized into not only sportsmen but full-fledged township celebrities with their romantic relationships, weddings and children’s births often being covered by the black media.<sup>40</sup> This evolution from boxer to icon is best captured by the experience of Tuli as

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<sup>36</sup> Advertisement for Jake Tuli versus Pancho Villa Bout, *African Sports* (Johannesburg), October 1953; and “Enter: Africa’s Hero!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1953.

<sup>37</sup> “Mokone’s quick bed for ‘Slumber’,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), November 1955.

<sup>38</sup> This is vital to point out as certainly white radicals, such Bloom and other participants with *King Kong*, read these and probably internalized the prominence of boxers, especially Dlamini.

<sup>39</sup> Usiyazi, “Talk Of The World,” *The World* (Johannesburg), September 7, 1957; and Joyce Hlube, “I Gave My Heart to a Fighter,” *Hi-Note* (Johannesburg), October 1954.

<sup>40</sup> “My thoughts (sic) turned to something new: my coming marriage,” *The World* (Johannesburg); and “‘Slumber’ Sleeps For Keeps!,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), August 1956.

his success both locally and in Britain afforded him the opportunity to feature prominently in the African press, appear in various advertisements for products ranging from cigarettes to Coca Cola to breakfast cereal, act in numerous South African films, become a boxing writer for *Zonk!*, and even cut a record featuring him and the Manhattan Brothers.<sup>41</sup>

### **King Kong: The Man behind The Myth**

After analyzing the growth and popularity of boxing on the Reef previously in this chapter, this section provides a detailed biography of Ezekiel “King Kong” Dlamini drawing from a variety of sources published during Dlamini’s life and after his death.<sup>42</sup> This analysis accomplishes numerous tasks: to demonstrate the tumultuous life faced by him (not to mention other boxers), how troubled his life became (possibly even suffering from mental illness), and how his transformation from an adequate heavyweight into a perceived unbeatable champion and township hero of almost mythical proportions impacted popular knowledge of the man. This section also seeks to separate the actual facts of him from the “King Kong” myth that grew following his death through popular histories as well as the *King Kong* musical itself.

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<sup>41</sup> This may have been a lesson gleamed from corporations from the United States during the 1930s that put Joe Louis’s face on advertisements in order to reach African American consumers.

<sup>42</sup> My main sources are separate *Drum* profiles of Dlamini by Lewis Nkosi and Nathaniel Nakasa, Mona De Beer’s four and a half page description of Dlamini in her published account and various other newspaper reports. I attempt to use other sources, such as various autobiographies and even a piece of historical fiction, to provide a more complete account of his life. With this said, I have recently discovered that criminal files from Dlamini’s various run-ins with the law are housed at the national archives in South Africa, and I hope to examine these files in totality when revising this dissertation for publication.

The oldest of six children (he had three brothers and two sisters),<sup>43</sup> Dlamini grew up in a “little town” called Vryheid (Afrikaans for “freedom”) in rural northern Natal,<sup>44</sup> and *Drum* reporter Nat Nakasa estimates that he was born “around the year 1925.”<sup>45</sup> Dlamini received only “intermittent schooling at a Catholic Mission” and dropped out of school completely “at about the age of 14”.<sup>46</sup> Possibly illiterate, he worked as a “garden-boy” for a local white family in Vryheid.<sup>47</sup> He eventually migrated to Durban and, after an unknown period of time, to Johannesburg.<sup>48</sup>

The reason for Dlamini’s migration to the Reef remains muddled. He may have possessed family already in Johannesburg as documentation shows that his brother, Elliot, lived in Johannesburg by 1957. Popular history contends that Dlamini moved to Johannesburg from Natal out of sheer thrill or in the pursuit of leisure. Nakasa believes “Durban was too quiet for this tall, Tarzan-youth” and points out that Dlamini was “Not bothered for one moment about getting himself a job and a boss”.<sup>49</sup> Seemingly using Nakasa’s account as her central source, *King Kong* chronicler Mona De Beer corroborates Nakasa’s contention by asserting, “But Durban was too quiet for the

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<sup>43</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>44</sup> Mona De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre* (Cape Town: Norman Howell, 2001), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>46</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> It is unclear just how long Dlamini lived in Durban before moving to the Transvaal.

<sup>49</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of King Kong,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

strapping, restless youth and the stories of the fabled *I-Goli*—[isiZulu for Johannesburg and meaning] City of Gold—lured him to the crowded slums of Johannesburg.”<sup>50</sup>

While these accounts by Nakasa and De Beer offer a thrilling and exciting depiction of Dlamini, it seems that a more ordinary and plausible reason brought about this migration: employment. Most Zulu men who had been coming to Johannesburg since its establishment came in search of employment.<sup>51</sup> Like most of the Union’s countryside, there was little chance of gainful employment for Africans in Vryheid, and De Beer notes, “Few of the men there can afford to stay at home to look after their animals and till their fields, for they need more than the land can offer.”<sup>52</sup> Additionally, Dlamini lived in the Wolhuter Hostel amongst other male migrants working in the area.<sup>53</sup> Though both Nakasa and De Beer claim that he chose to gamble rather than seek steady (not to mention legal) employment, it appears farfetched that a man with little money from an impoverished background would travel from far away Natal simply to gamble or fulfill his curiosity. A more plausible explanation could be that Dlamini may have succumbed to gambling after facing difficulties in either procuring a job or the proper “pass” to legally work and reside in Johannesburg. It may also be possible that this naïve, undereducated migrant could have been duped into thinking that he could earn a living through gambling.

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<sup>50</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>52</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> “King Kong Gets A Public Funeral,” *The World* (Johannesburg), April 13, 1957.

Furthermore, virtually every fighter of the era relied mainly on employment outside of boxing. Despite their emergence as township celebrities, boxers made relatively little money from matches and the sport was often considered a “mug’s game” in that boxers were paid “miserly” sums.<sup>54</sup> Also, professional matches and tournaments occurred at an infrequent rate.<sup>55</sup> Since a boxer’s primary income came from legitimate jobs, the sport emerged as more of a paying pastime for even the top professional fighters, and only a select few could claim boxing as their primary occupation. Durban’s Alby Tisong was a butcher,<sup>56</sup> Elijah “Maestro” Mokone taught at a school,<sup>57</sup> and Richard “Black Hawk” Hlubi drove a bus.<sup>58</sup> Where possible, fighters used their size and strength to work as bouncers or policemen, such as former heavyweight boxer Gilbert “Kwembu” Moloi who worked as a bouncer at Sophiatown’s Odin Cinema.<sup>59</sup> Even the best fighters could not rely on boxing as their main occupation when in South Africa; when “Jolting Joe” Maseko left for England in 1950 to compete against British boxers, his official occupation listed on his passport was “delivery-boy”. Thus it is further implausible that even at the height of his career Dlamini did not possess some sort of employment.

Despite being bigger and meaner than most opponents, Dlamini did not initially fare well at boxing. Not possessing the technical refinement of how to throw and take a

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<sup>54</sup> Leslie Mackenzie, “Leslie Mackenzie’s Last Fight!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), November 1953.

<sup>55</sup> Dlamini himself was involved in relatively few matches over the course of his boxing career.

<sup>56</sup> “Alby Tisong, S.A. Featherweight Champion,” in Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People*, 146.

<sup>57</sup> “Elijah ‘Maestro’ Mokone, Feather and Lightweight Champ,” in Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People*, 149.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Maimane, “Demon In The Ring!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), November 1954.

<sup>59</sup> Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1963), 7.

punch, he challenged the men in the boxing gymnasium at the BMSC.<sup>60</sup> Meeting Dlamini's challenge was William "Baby Batter" Mbatha, a professional boxer and the gym's lead trainer. Mbatha handily defeated the oaf but afterwards convinced Dlamini that if he received instruction, he could possibly earn a living as a boxer.<sup>61</sup> "Willie had a soft spot for the lad," remembers established boxing trainer Benny Singh, and together the two tried to mold "King Kong" into a legitimate fighter.<sup>62</sup> With practice and training, Dlamini took to the sport and thrived, and he emerged as the main contender in both the Heavyweight and Cruiserweight divisions by the late 1940s.<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately for Dlamini, he was perhaps *too* large, as few fighters in his weight class existed throughout the country. Generally combatants in the two heaviest divisions faced difficulties in securing bouts, best demonstrated by these divisions being the only two with vacant titles as of March 1951 with Dlamini being the main contender for both of these titles.<sup>64</sup> *The African Drum* even published a story noting the lack of even welterweight boxers,<sup>65</sup> and Arthur Maimane, *Drum*'s boxing correspondent, "decided to forgo the [ranking of] heavyweights" in *Drum*'s monthly boxing rankings for a number of months between 1952 and 1954 due to one contender "not training" and two, including

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<sup>60</sup> It is common for even the greatest fighters to struggle a bit during their initial months in the ring.

<sup>61</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, "The Life and Death of KING KONG," *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>62</sup> Benny Singh, *My Champions Were Dark* (Durban: Pennant Publishing Company, 1963), 69-70.

<sup>63</sup> Sports Editor, "Boxing Rankings," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>64</sup> Sports Editor, "Boxing Rankings," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>65</sup> Sports Editor, "Wot! No Welters," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1951.



Dlamini, being “in jail.”<sup>66</sup> With this shortage of heavyweights, promoters even tried to convince Dlamini to lose weight and move down to a lower weight class as his first fight ever (1946) was versus a middleweight opponent.<sup>67</sup> Even as more heavyweight fighters emerged as the decade progressed, matches remained rare and it took over a year for another heavyweight bout to take place after Dlamini’s final fight in August 1956.<sup>68</sup>

As a result, Dlamini fought in a relatively low number of matches over the course of his career. A 1951 article by Nxumalo remarked, “[Dlamini] has been kicking his heels in lack of fights for some considerable time now; first because his wild, ferocious way of fighting sold him badly to the promoters and secondly because heavyweights are in short supply in the non-European fight market.”<sup>69</sup> *The World* claimed that no heavyweight challengers emerged to face Dlamini “for more than four years in the early ‘40’s.”<sup>70</sup> Even when he did claim the non-European heavyweight title, he found no more competitors “unless one of the light heavyweights or, perhaps, middleweights takes a chance in the heavyweights.”<sup>71</sup> In her synopsis of Dlamini’s life, De Beer estimates that he faced “scarcely half a dozen [opponents in organized matches] in his whole boxing career.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Arthur Maimane, “Drum Ratings,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1952.

<sup>67</sup> Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>68</sup> “Heavies Emerge From Their Corners,” *The World* (Johannesburg), September 7, 1957.

<sup>69</sup> Henry Nxumalo, *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1951.

<sup>70</sup> “King Kong may box again,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 16, 1956.

<sup>71</sup> The Boxing Editor, “Three Fighters Hold Six Titles—And They’re ‘Frozen’,” *African Sports* (Johannesburg), March 1954.

<sup>72</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 2.

Due to this lack of opponents, Dlamini resorted to fighting “open-air, barefist matches” in Pretoria and Johannesburg.<sup>73</sup> The press portrayed his participation as actively seeking out these highly illegal bare-fisted boxing matches in both Pretoria and the mine dumps to hone his technique on willing but under-skilled amateur fighters, which only served to cement popular beliefs that he would fight anyone anywhere. These matches were extremely dangerous and presumably impacted his body in a negative manner, as it was claimed that he fought each Sunday for “weeks on end.”<sup>74</sup>

Out of the weak and small pool of non-European heavyweights, Dlamini emerged as the preeminent heavy in the country for an extended period of time, and the local press pushed this image by hyping the “King Kong” fights that did get booked.<sup>75</sup> Later profiling a “Kong” comeback, *The World* noted, “King Kong has been a boxing favorite for many years on the Rand.”<sup>76</sup> Those he did face often lacked the skill, strength, or fighting experience to challenge him, and he remained undefeated throughout most of his professional career. Those heavies that he was able to face often were green and lacked training. John L. “Big Sam” Sullivan, a local Sophiatown weightlifter, only began boxing shortly before his bout with Dlamini.<sup>77</sup> He challenged Kong without ever appearing in a boxing ring prior, and would pay the consequence as *The African Drum*

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<sup>73</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>74</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>75</sup> “King Kong to defend Title,” *Hi-Note!* (Johannesburg), October 1954.

<sup>76</sup> “King Kong may box again,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 16, 1956.

<sup>77</sup> Henry Nxumalo, *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1951.

publicly warned that Sullivan needed to face a few more opponents<sup>78</sup> before engaging in a bout “against a ‘menace’ like King Kong.”<sup>79</sup> These untalented or under-practiced opponents such as Sullivan, whom Dlamini “stopped via the short route [a knock out],” fostered an image that depicted Dlamini as an unbeatable, highly skilled heavyweight.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, this extraordinarily sized man with an apt nickname was more of an oddity than a supremely skilled fighter, but it made him seem unbeatable to loyal fans and common folk.

Though this lack of contenders prevented Dlamini from landing many fights, it did facilitate his rise to stardom and provided the rationale behind his “King Kong” nickname. General consensus, on the other hand, amongst the era’s boxing reports indicates that Dlamini was not a technically skilled fighter and probably would not have fared well in a more competitive weight class, such as flyweight, where local gyms were now producing fighters who could even compete for the international titles. In actuality, it appears that Dlamini was not the dominating champion that many considered him, but this fact eventually became blurred or overlooked by popular history. One of his trainers, Singh, quips, “I helped to launch King Kong more as a gesture of friendship [to William “Baby Batter” Mbatha] than from any belief in his prospects.”<sup>81</sup> Additionally, Dlamini battled significant health problems throughout his career, which certainly hindered his

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<sup>78</sup> It must be pointed out that Sullivan was not his real name and was probably a fighter name after the heavyweight champion with the same name. This fact also implies that Sullivan probably had been fighting for a significant time in order to acquire such a name.

<sup>79</sup> Sports Editor, “Talking Sport,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1951.

<sup>80</sup> “King Kong may box again,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 16, 1956.

<sup>81</sup> Singh, *My Champions Were Dark*, 69.

boxing.<sup>82</sup> Lastly, he endured at least three losses during his career as he lost his first fight (1946) to Joe Maseko, lost a bout with Nat Mngoma for the “South African Amateur Championship” and to Simon Greb (another opponent in a lower weight division).<sup>83</sup> Though two of these fights took place when Dlamini was still an amateur, they reveal that he was far from unbeatable.

Beyond his career against other black opponents, there is limited documentation of Dlamini succeeding in his few sparring matches with local white opponents. Understanding the embarrassing implications for a regime bent on racial separation and European superiority that could stem from an African publicly beating a European boxer, the apartheid regime ultimately banned professional bouts between whites and blacks throughout the Union with the passing of the Boxing and Wrestling Act in 1954.<sup>84</sup> Until the passing of this act, an unofficial policy of racial segregation between white and non-white combatants was enforced. The racial climate in Johannesburg initiated more drastic segregation policies in comparison to Cape Town or Durban as the city barred virtually any black performance or fight at the city hall in 1956 with white spectators being barred from attending black bouts, except in an “official capacity.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Arthur Maimane, “The Gen... About Boxing,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1952.

<sup>83</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>84</sup> Bruce Murray and Christopher Merrett, *Caught Behind: Race and Politics in Springbok Cricket* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2004), 50; and Sy Mogapi, “World Champs fight with black sparmates,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1955.

<sup>85</sup> “Transvaal loses the big fights through lack of a venue,” *The World* (Johannesburg), February 25, 1956.

Despite these attempts to segregate the sport, secret interracial sparring occurred over the decade, especially as the gap between black and white skill levels closed.<sup>86</sup> White boxers often sparred with black combatants for two reasons: there simply were not enough skilled local white fighters necessary to train for international competition, and black fighters worked for less money than white opponents. For black fighters, these matches represented an opportunity to significantly supplement their income. These sessions furthermore allowed non-white boxers the chance to gauge their ability to fight on the world level by squaring off against their white peers, and a handful actually enhanced their chances to compete abroad through such sparring matches.<sup>87</sup>

Aware of the racial taboos being broken during these sessions, white boxers, trainers and promoters alike applied exhaustive measures, such as banning the media and cameras from gyms, to keep news of these secret practices from leaking out into the public.<sup>88</sup> In spite of these efforts, word did leak out on some occasions, such as when David “Slumber” Gogotya “floored” local white bantamweight and eventual world champion Vic Toweel in 1952 (an event that strongly aided in launching Gogotya’s own international career). In comparison to the white heavies of the era, conversely, Dlamini did not fare as well. As opposed to the widespread rumors of Gogotya’s success, there is nothing in the historical record indicating that Dlamini dominated or even held his own

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<sup>86</sup> Sy Mogapi, “World Champs fight with black sparmates,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1955.

<sup>87</sup> It is unclear when interracial matches started taking but they were not uncommon by the 1970s.

<sup>88</sup> Sy Mogapi, “World Champs fight with black sparmates,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1955.

against local white heavyweights Johnny Arthur<sup>89</sup> and Ewart Potgieter.<sup>90</sup> There are published reports, however, that Potgieter forced Dlamini “twice over the ropes” meaning he was not only knocked down but actually knocked out of the ring.<sup>91</sup> While these were only practice sessions and cannot be considered a true gauge of a fighter’s ability, the fact that news of these sessions leaked out— and was deemed important enough that the African press reported on them— demonstrates their importance to the African public in gauging the actual skill level of non-white boxers. Additionally, the fact that the historical record of these interracial sparring sessions only includes negative tales concerning Dlamini seems significant. They further substantiate the claims that Dlamini probably could not have gone on to compete abroad, unlike Tuli, Mokone or the era’s other fighters competing abroad, and thus demonstrate that he was not the world-class foe that the African press and public considered him to be. As a self-promoter, however, Dlamini possessed no rival.

### **King Kong: From Boxer to Idol**

Despite possessing a relatively mediocre career, Dlamini was popularly considered an unbeatable champion. Without evidence, the press painted him as going to no end to secure bouts, and he purportedly became enraged by those that did challenge

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<sup>89</sup> Sy Mogapi, “Why Keep It Secret? World Champs Fight With Black Sparmates,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1955.

<sup>90</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>91</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

him whether they be tsotsis, street toughs, weightlifters or average city folk. “The crowds love a champion and, despite his uncontrolled temper and the violence with which he would lash out at anyone who crossed him,” writes De Beer.<sup>92</sup> Popular myths spread of how Dlamini tracked down light-heavyweight Sam Langford in Durban after Langford claimed he was “keen to face King Kong.” In his account of Dlamini’s life, Nakasa writes, “The King heard of this, so he took a single ticket to Durban — 400 odd miles from Johannesburg — just to see this boxer who dared challenge him.”<sup>93</sup> While it seems highly unlikely that Dlamini traveled all the way to Natal simply to challenge Langford, the facts that the press reported these stories and, more importantly, that the public ingested them demonstrate why many came to believe that Dlamini was a great champion.

A catchy nickname, flamboyant antics in the ring, unorthodox training methods, and basic unpredictability brought a great deal of attention to Dlamini, ultimately drawing a large following. He inspired curiosity wherever he went and thus many remembered his eccentric mannerisms. De Beer writes, “The crowds love a champion and... they responded warmly to his flamboyant antics.”<sup>94</sup> In particular, Dlamini’s “unorthodox training methods”<sup>95</sup> including “running for miles... carrying dumb-bells in his hands, shadow-boxing on Johannesburg’s busiest street corners and walking about

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<sup>92</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>94</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 2.

<sup>95</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 3.

with heavy weighted boots to strengthen his legs”, made him a spectacle to be seen and a crowd favorite.<sup>96</sup>

Regardless of their lives outside of the ring, local fighters found it necessary to proclaim their dominance inside it, and showmanship personified a major part of black boxing. Publicly proclaiming one’s dominance served to garner fame for oneself and publicity for one’s bouts; together, these two translated into more tickets being sold and, for the boxers, more in “winnings” from their handlers. These proclamations also asserted a machismo that would be widely lauded by fans. As a result, it was commonplace for a boxer, trainer or manager to boldly make an “open challenge” to anyone brave enough to test their mettle against the fighter.<sup>97</sup>

The significance of showmanship is particularly relevant to analyzing “King Kong” Dlamini’s career, as he often unabashedly flaunted his bulky size and strength. Nxumalo wrote, “With his untidy, crinkly hair sprouting out like a bed of wild plants, King Kong, 191 lbs. of him—and I don’t know how much of that is flesh—stepped into that Johannesburg fight ring amid great applause. It turned out, however, that the greater part of the applause was for what he was wearing. On the back of his red gown were the curious words: ‘African Spy Smasher,’ but there was no mistaking his intention to please both the public and his handlers.”<sup>98</sup> Though it remains unclear why Dlamini claimed

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<sup>96</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> “Orlando Terror’s Challenge,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>98</sup> Henry Nxumalo, *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1951.



himself an “African Spy Smasher,” Nxumalo’s reporting demonstrates that the heavyweight made a concerted effort to entertain and humor the crowds.<sup>99</sup>

Crowds widely loved Dlamini’s bullying and boastful nature. He even carried this demeanor into the ring: as one *Drum* article noted, “he would refuse to go to his neutral corner [when he knocked down Moloi]. He stood over Moloi with his fists clenched, ready to pummel him to the ground should he get up.”<sup>100</sup> De Beer points out that the public loved him “despite his uncontrolled temper and the violence with which he would lash out at anyone who crossed him.”<sup>101</sup> Fans would later even pack the courtroom during his murder trial in order to watch his dramatic behavior and loud reactions, and Todd Matshikiza notes, “They [the public in the courtroom] were also turning their eyes away from a merciless beater-upper. He ate you up at the slightest excuse, for looking at him in anticipation of an acknowledging smile.”<sup>102</sup>

Dlamini’s rural background and upbringing too became a key reason for society’s fascination with him and his career. For those who migrated from rural locales across Southern Africa, Dlamini’s rise from clueless country bumpkin to unbeatable heavyweight champion presumably cemented him as a hero. He refused to conform to the rules and conventions of urban Johannesburg. In a metropolitan society where “can’t gets” clothing and slick Hollywood-inspired style meant a great deal, Dlamini’s own

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<sup>99</sup> The reason for his self-proclamation of being a “Spy Smasher” seems lost to history, but it possibly could have related to boxers or gangsters spying on him, actual apartheid informants following him, or even a tangential reference to the ongoing Cold War between the United States and U.S.S.R.

<sup>100</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>101</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Todd Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 110-1.

style remained understated. Though he would appear in an occasional advertisement (he may have appeared on the cover of a Pan-American catalogue),<sup>103</sup> Dlamini was far from the fashionable icons that other fighters, such as Tuli or Mokone, were and thus endorsed notably fewer products than many of his peers. Instead he sported “his untidy, crinkly hair sprouting out like a bed of wild plants”,<sup>104</sup> and refused to don the dapper American clothes of the time (which is the reason why Nathan Mdladle wore a “drab, black outfit” when starring as Kong in the musical).<sup>105</sup> This imagery perhaps further ingratiated him to the city’s working class black populations as he exuded a life similar to those who remained firmly tied to rural lifestyles and backgrounds.

Another particular Johannesburg norm that he refused to succumb to was intimidation by local *tsostis*. In an area where *moegoe* (in *Tsotsitaal*, the language of gangsters on the Reef, “a derogatory term for one who is not streetwise”)<sup>106</sup> and *dzaao* (*Tsotsitaal* for “country bumpkin”)<sup>107</sup> were preyed upon by gangsters, thieves, knifemen, scam artists and shifty employers, non-conformists like Dlamini who refused to accept norms (believed necessary for sheer survival in Johannesburg) and yet still found success were rare. Instead of avoiding attention from *tstotsis* and street toughs, Dlamini boasted of beating and later killing would be attackers. *Drum* writer Casey Motsisi pointed out

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<sup>103</sup> Pan-American Mail Order Advertisement, *Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1952; Pan-American Mail Order Advertisement, *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1952; and Madi Blood Purifier Advertisement, *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1952.

<sup>104</sup> Henry Nxumalo, *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1951.

<sup>105</sup> “‘King Kong’ is so boring — for people in the show!”, *The World* (Johannesburg), April 4, 1959.

<sup>106</sup> Louis Molamu, *Tsotsi-taal: a Dictionary of the Language of Sophiatown* (Pretoria: University of South Africa), 69.

<sup>107</sup> Molamu, *Tsotsi-taal*, 28.

that Dlamini often beat up gamblers who took his money even when they had rightfully won: “This crapshooting bozo who never really ‘lost’! After his money was gone he would always ask the winner to give him ‘jockey’—a tip for old luck’s sake. But often he would name a ‘jockey’ price higher than what the winner had won.”<sup>108</sup> Thus in all probability this Vryheid-born bumpkin inspired others who recently arrived in this fast-paced metropolis as he was a man to whom migrants could relate and with whom they could empathize. This imagery presented by the media and his handlers, at the very least, encouraged the public to rally behind him.

For the local press in general and *Drum* in particular, Dlamini made for an exceptional story. As their writings often glamorized the fast gangster lifestyle, the local press often presented the necessity to be streetwise, smart or clever to survive in the unforgiving city of Johannesburg. In other words, they presented the belief that one needed to be either a *tsotsi* or possess the necessary book smarts (i.e. proper schooling and formal training) to live and function in the city. Even *tsotsis* often used the term “klevah” to demarcate who was streetwise, essentially the opposite of *moegoe*. To the *Drum* writers and their ilk, Dlamini embodied the anti-*tsotsi* and the anti-intellectual, as he outwardly lacked both the street and book smarts supposedly needed to survive. And yet he thrived, becoming the dominant black heavyweight of the era, at least in the public imagination.

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<sup>108</sup> Casey Motsisi, “Hobo King of Kong,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1957.

## Boxing Monikers and the Origin of “King Kong”

Beyond catering to crowds and openly bragging about one’s abilities, a vital component of this showmanship was the crafting of boxing nicknames. Such names were vital in shaping a fighter’s image and drumming up fan support. Though some fought under their birth names, many adopted intimidating and militant handles, such as Simon “Orlando Terror” Greb,<sup>109</sup> “Brown Panther,” “Kid Leopard,” “Gorilla Mkize,” “King Killer,” “Rock Ramiah,” “Speedy Bandes,” “Fighting Gash,” “Fighting Demon,” “Hurricane Gilbert,” Michael “The Black Eagle” Edwards, “Pancho Villa,”<sup>110</sup> “One-Round Hank,” “Fighting Chocolate,”<sup>111</sup> Kelly “Tiger” Franks,<sup>112</sup> Paul “Atom Bomber” Mononyane,<sup>113</sup> Johannes “Jolting Joe” Maseko,<sup>114</sup> Willie “Baby Batter” Mbatha,<sup>115</sup> Jason “Black Hammer” Radebe,<sup>116</sup> Reuben “Panama Flash” Zondi, Ephraim “Kid Bogart” Bohata,<sup>117</sup> “One Eye Ace” and “Julius Caesar.”<sup>118</sup> Nicknames like the aforementioned emphasized a boxer’s skill, prowess and tenacity. These naming practices went beyond the boxers themselves as boxing clubs acquired names like the Frisco Kids Boxing

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<sup>109</sup> “Orlando Terror’s Challenge,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>110</sup> Probably named after the leader of the Mexican Revolution but also could have been named after former World Flyweight champion from the Philippines, Francisco “Pancho Villa” Guilledo.

<sup>111</sup> Sports Editor, “Boxing Rankings,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>112</sup> Sports Editor, “South African Boxing in 1950,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>113</sup> Sports Editor, “Wot! No Welters,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1951.

<sup>114</sup> “Round and About,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1951.

<sup>115</sup> Umvoti, “Three Great African Boxers,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1951.

<sup>116</sup> J. Arthur Maimane, “A New Hammer Strikes,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1955.

<sup>117</sup> “Tiger in the ring!,” *The Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1955.

<sup>118</sup> “From Cape Town,” *Hi-Note!* (Johannesburg), October 1954.

Club<sup>119</sup> (presumably named after the film starring James Cagney) or the Black Sjambok Stable. (A sjambok is a whip often associated with punishment, and the stable was named after former boxer Charles “Black Sjambok” Sabe.)<sup>120</sup> Though not all boxers chose names that were overtly militant or menacing (some even adopted more welcoming fight names like “Kid Snowball,” “Kid Sweetie,” and Enoch “Schoolboy” Nhlapo), most did.<sup>121</sup> These nicknames openly boasted the skills and talent of the fighter, as well as celebrating the fighters’ ferocity and ultra-masculine identities.<sup>122</sup>

Over his career, Dlamini possessed a number of nicknames including “King Marshall” and “The Spy Smasher,” but his “King Kong” nickname became the most recognized and most used over the course of his career. According Esmé Matshikiza, he became known for that due to “his size and lethal punch.”<sup>123</sup> The issue of whether Dlamini’s nickname was derived from the *King Kong* films is debated often throughout recounts of his life. Harry Bloom, lawyer and author of the *King Kong* musical’s book, claims that Dlamini’s nickname came “not out of admiration for Edgar Wallace’s jungle monster, but because he liked the grand regal sound of the name.”<sup>124</sup> Claims such as

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<sup>119</sup> Sports Editor, “Golden City Boxing,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1951.

<sup>120</sup> Sports Editor, “Talking Sport,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1951.

<sup>121</sup> Sports Editor, “Boxing Rankings,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>122</sup> These nicknames appear not imply any lack of skill or success, as “Kid Snowball” who became the S.A. non-white Flyweight Champion and “Schoolboy” became a major figure in South African boxing by the conclusion of the 1950s. Rather these “nicer” nicknames may have been crafted to appeal to fans or represent particular aspects of a boxer’s background (ie. Nhlapo was very young when he began his career).

<sup>123</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 326.

<sup>124</sup> Harry Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: The superb African jazz opera* (London: Fontana Books, 1961), 12.

Bloom's, however, appear unfounded.<sup>125</sup> *King Kong* films were accessible to African audiences during Dlamini's rise to prominence, and coincidentally, "torn hoardings advertising *King Kong*" are mentioned in Harry Bloom's own novel, *Transvaal Episode*, set in a fictional Transvaal town of Nelstroom. Thus it seems naïve to believe that this nickname did not stem from the gorilla film of the 1930s.<sup>126</sup>

It seems more probable that an overgrown dumb brute with, in the words of Nakasa, a "gorilla face" emanating from the rural countryside would be labeled as "King Kong" by established, sophisticated urbanites.<sup>127</sup> As a heavyweight in an era and locale that possessed few men big enough to even qualify for the weight class, Dlamini presumably did seem like an overgrown ape. Additionally, the parallels between popular conception of Dlamini's life and the 1933 *King Kong* film—where a savage, over-grown giant emerges from the jungle to disrupt a thriving metropolis—are too stark to ignore. In recounting Dlamini's later behavior in a criminal court, Todd Matshikiza invokes the imagery of Dlamini being a caged beast by describing him as "jumping up and down like a gorilla" and "an angered giant-sized ape trying to set itself free."<sup>128</sup> Various newspaper and autobiographical accounts of the era further back up this claim by stating that his nickname was indeed derived from the film. Two key examples are a gossip column in

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<sup>125</sup> Bloom's statement is printed in the 1961 edition of the *King Kong* book, which was designed to acquaint foreign audiences to the life of "King Kong," the history behind the musical and the particular aspects of South African culture presented in the opera. Therefore it is possible that Bloom began making these claims to avert any copyright infringement.

<sup>126</sup> These misguided claims may actually have been deliberate on the part of the Union of Southern African Artists in order to advert potentially infringing on the copyright to the makers of the 1933 film.

<sup>127</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, "The Life and Death of King Kong," *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>128</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 111.

*The World* which contends that Dlamini was named after the “gigantic gorilla who was so big that he... plucked war planes from the sky as if they were a flight of mosquitoes,”<sup>129</sup> and Miriam Makeba’s autobiography, which notes that “people gave him the nickname ‘King Kong,’ after the mighty creature from the movie.”<sup>130</sup>

### **The Overthrow of a King**

After a short stint in jail, Dlamini returned to the professional boxing ranks in 1953.<sup>131</sup> He immediately sought out the official title of South Africa’s non-white heavyweight champion, and he finally achieved this distinction in a bout in Cape Town on April 11, 1953. While significant, this feat is misleading. His opponent was Joe Mtambo who was not a true heavyweight as he “weighed in at the cruiserweight limit of 175 lbs.”<sup>132</sup> Thus Dlamini captured the heavyweight title without actually facing a true heavyweight fighter. Regardless he came out of this match as the heavyweight champion but also, according to *African Sports*, “the only legitimate heavyweight in circulation.”<sup>133</sup>

This victory seemingly brought Dlamini the praise and attention that he craved, but it only lasted for a brief few months. Soon after securing the title, he fought Simon Greb Mtimkulu, then the “No. 1 middleweight contender” for the non-European title, at

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<sup>129</sup> Usiyazi, “Talk of the World,” *The World* (Johannesburg), November 14, 1956.

<sup>130</sup> Miriam Makeba with James Hall, *Makeba: My Story* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 68.

<sup>131</sup> Arthur Maimane, “Drum Ratings,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1952.

<sup>132</sup> “No Contenders For Titles in the Two Top Divisions,” *African Sports* (Johannesburg), August 1953.

<sup>133</sup> “No Contenders For Titles in the Two Top Divisions,” *African Sports* (Johannesburg), August 1953.

“catch-weights” (a bout between two fighters of different weight classes) and lost.<sup>134</sup>

Unlike his earlier defeats, this would be his first and only loss as a professional boxer, and it profoundly impacted Dlamini’s career and reputation. This fight became the most humiliating in Dlamini’s career as the lighter Mtimkulu knocked out “Kong” in the third round.<sup>135</sup> The defeat left his prowess as a dominant heavyweight questioned and “his fans shocked.”<sup>136</sup>

To compound matters further, the fight was an undercard for the featured bout between Jake Tuli (who had recently returned from a prominent career abroad) and Abednego “Pancho Villa” Mnguni where an estimated 13,000 people turned out for the country’s “biggest-ever non-white boxing tournament.”<sup>137</sup> While remaining the non-white heavyweight champion since this fight was not for the title, the giant would not live down this loss to an undersized fighter in front of this massive crowd. No longer an unbeatable champ, Dlamini now transformed into laughable chump. Furious at his defeat, Dlamini demanded a rematch to recapture his lost pride, both of which he would never regain.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Sy Mogapi, “Final Round-Up,” *African Sports* (Johannesburg), October 1953.

<sup>135</sup> Arthur Maimane, “Boxing 1954!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1954.

<sup>136</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>137</sup> The peculiarly high attendance figure for this bout was due to the event being Tuli’s first bout in South Africa since his tour of Britain. See “Enter: Africa’s Hero!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1953; and Arthur Maimane, “Boxing 1954!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1954.

<sup>138</sup> Arthur Maimane, “Boxing 1954!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1954.



This humiliation and the shortage of opponents forced Dlamini to retire from boxing in 1954.<sup>139</sup> This retirement may also have been influenced by an illness or physical ailment as the press claimed that doctors found him medically unsound for the sport.<sup>140</sup> Despite being retired (not to mention in and out of jail) for the next three years, Dlamini loomed large over the sport of boxing and his name remained well known. In announcing the retirement of David “Slumber” Gogotya, a challenger for the British Empire title in the bantamweight division, *The World* reported that Gogotya “learnt his boxing skill in Kong Kong’s Blue Mountain stable and was later managed by Ben Jele.”<sup>141</sup> To call the Blue Mountain “Kong’s stable” seems to overstate his impact or influence on the gym. Thus the author probably used the description because more readers would be familiar with Dlamini than any other boxer or trainer associated with Blue Mountain, even the now internationally competitive Gogotya (though some claim that Dlamini ran his own stable at the Wolhuter Men’s Hostel and possibly trained Gogotya there).<sup>142</sup> Thus one realizes the nature of his boxing career; he remained in the public imagination despite no longer being directly involved with the sport.

Though he still appeared as a major figure, his status had taken a significant hit from the Mtimkulu loss, and he worked as a bouncer at local dance halls as a fall back occupation. As a bouncer, his job essentially was to break up fights, kick out unruly

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<sup>139</sup> “Boxing Titles Shuffle Around Crazily In 1956,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), January 1957.

<sup>140</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>141</sup> Oliver Mti, “David Gogotya Retires From Ring,” *The World* (Johannesburg), April 14, 1956.

<sup>142</sup> Arthur Maimane, “The Gen... About Boxing,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1952.

patrons and protect the paying audience from gangsters.<sup>143</sup> Thus he emerged as an even more likely target for local *tsotsis*.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to detail the tensions and dangers between boxers and local gangsters during the era of the 1950s. As argued earlier, many communities considered boxing a way to instill discipline into young men. In addition to keeping them out of criminal lifestyles, it was widely believed that boxing represented a feasible avenue for boys to develop self-defense skills. In a city where the press reported that “1 IN 24 OF ALL AFRICANS ON THE REEF WILL BE MURDERED IN THE COURSE OF THEIR LIFETIME” and where the police were habitually avoided due to pass book concerns, many considered it essential to possess the ability to defend one’s self.<sup>144</sup> Thus boxing became a key way to teach self-defense to boys and thus prepare them to cope with the dangers on the streets; thus boxing skills became a means of survival for many boys.

While the presumption that boxing prowess could deter *tsotsis* persisted, this belief often backfired. Many boxers, both amateur and professional, used their fighting skills to actually become *tsotsis* themselves, thus disproving the notion that boxing would keep youth out of criminality. In his autobiography, reformed gangster Don Mattera describes the Gestapo gang as “a gang of boxers who had a training centre in Sophiatown’s notorious Victoria Street. They were tough hard-knuckled men who used to challenge people indiscriminately in the streets to fist fights, and always ended up

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<sup>143</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>144</sup> “Inside Johannesburg’s Underworld,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), October 1951.

winning.”<sup>145</sup> Additionally, one of the Reef’s most notorious gangsters, George “Kort Boy” Mbalweni, fought occasionally in local tournaments.<sup>146</sup> Thus we see that boxing skills could be useful not only for self-defense, but also for offensive attacks.

The publicity, fame and air of masculinity surrounding boxers further attracted the ire of local thugs. Their interest in the sport of boxing is further demonstrated by the language having a specific term, *mokzin*, for boxers,<sup>147</sup> and *Drum* running a story about boxing entirely in *Tsotsitaal*.<sup>148</sup> One middleweight was threatened and shot at by *tsotsis*, stripped down “leaving him only his vest,” and then offered the option of being escorted home “in case some one tried to hurt him!”<sup>149</sup> Another needed a finger amputated from one such attack (he told *Drum*, “I had to have it cut off because of boxing. After it had healed I could not make a fist. It had to come off.”).<sup>150</sup> By targeting boxers, *tsotsis* humiliated well-known masculine role models while simultaneously displaying their own physical prowess against often heavier, more muscular men and thus asserting dominance of their neighborhoods. Furthermore, they presumably competed against these muscular “beef-cakes” for the affections of women by beating fighters in street fights.<sup>151</sup>

Dlamini’s profession as both boxer and now bouncer put him repeatedly at odds with local gangs—in particular, the Spoilers. The Spoilers were one of Johannesburg’s most feared and brutal African gangs. In 1956, for instance, they attacked a “non-

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<sup>145</sup> Don Mattera, *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 103.

<sup>146</sup> “Kort Boy,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), October 1954.

<sup>147</sup> Molamu, *Tsotsi-taal: a Dictionary of the Language of Sophiatown*, 69.

<sup>148</sup> Kid “Bra Lingo” Lahlapansi, “Hou Timing, Man!,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1957.

<sup>149</sup> “Boxer Stripped,” *Hi-Note* (Johannesburg), September 1956.

<sup>150</sup> “Joas ‘Kangaroo’ Maoto, Welterweight Champ,” in Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People*, 152.

<sup>151</sup> Usiyazi, “Talk Of The World,” *The World* (Johannesburg), September 7, 1957.

European Rag Ball at the University Great Hall” (University of Witwatersrand) in an attempt to kidnap a nurse and “threw panic into everybody near them.”<sup>152</sup> Following the trend of terrorizing pretty nurses, the Spoilers targeted Baragwanath Hospital and even succeeded in kidnapping one.<sup>153</sup> One of their key leaders, Zorro, is said to have inscribed the letter “Z” on the foreheads of the women whom he courted or was involved with sexually.<sup>154</sup>

Due to his size and boxing prominence, Dlamini would be a formidable foe for any gangster. On the other hand, humiliating him could conceivably enhance one’s position as local badass, and thus it appears that the King became a repeated target of *tsotsis*. Combined with Dlamini’s disposition in confronting most who disrespected him made for a deadly concoction and Dlamini would infrequently battle *tsotsis* throughout his time in Johannesburg. During one such altercation, Dlamini killed Ronnie Motlhabi, a member of the Spoilers. Though he would go on to be acquitted of this murder by the Rand Supreme Court in January 1956, the gang sought to avenge their fallen comrade and aimed repeatedly to enact revenge on the boxer.<sup>155</sup> He remained a target of theirs for the remainder of his life.

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<sup>152</sup> “Spoilers Terrorize Dancers At Wits,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 23, 1956.

<sup>153</sup> “Kidnapped Nurse Locked Up In,” *The World* (Johannesburg), August 18, 1956.

<sup>154</sup> Clive Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: the Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935-1976* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2000), 70.

<sup>155</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder,” *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

Like most African criminals awaiting trial in Johannesburg, Dlamini ended up at the city's Old Fort during this murder trial.<sup>156</sup> Literally a fortress from the Anglo-Boer War, the prison held a number of notable inmates at one point or another including Nelson Mandela (during the treason trial), Ruth First (treason trial), Joe Slovo (treason trial), Oliver Tambo (treason trial), Mahatma Gandhi (during his protests against passes for Asians) and even a young Winston Churchill (during the Anglo-Boer War). The facility's large walls and formidable appearance protected the outside world from knowing many of the horrors taking place behind the prison's walls.<sup>157</sup>

The "Number Four" section held Africans pending trial by the municipal court systems, and it loomed large within local society as a place no one ever wanted to end up. Though often containing a mixture of hardened criminals and pass violators (otherwise law abiding citizens), the prisoner hierarchy was dominated by the toughest of criminals, and proved a particularly rough environment. Thefts, rapes, assaults and murders regularly occurred as the hardened criminals took advantage of less-seasoned and weaker inmates.<sup>158</sup> Conditions in the prison were so intense and dangerous that *Drum* published an exposé concerning prison conditions in March of 1954.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> When dealing with crime in this era, it is important to note that improper or lost pass document, alcohol possession and other misdemeanors (or even freedoms) in other countries were criminal offenses for Africans in the union. Thus most Africans could be considered a criminal by legal system at one point or another in their lives. For more information on the history of this particular prison, see Lauren Segal, *Number Four: The Making of Constitution Hill* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>157</sup> The jail received a recent renovation and is now the site of the country's constitutional court. Part of the renovations features an archive on prisoners at the Fort, but this archive seems to house nothing on Dlamini's stays in the Fort.

<sup>158</sup> "Old Rogues Cash In On New Jail Racket," *The World* (Johannesburg), April 13, 1957.

<sup>159</sup> Dorothy C. Woodson, *Drum: An Index to "Africa's Leading Magazine" 1951-1965* (Madison: African Studies Program at University of Wisconsin, 1988), 136.

Through Don Mattera's autobiography, we do possess some account of Dlamini's behavior inside the jail walls. Mattera dates his stay in "Number Four" as from December 17, 1955 to at least Boxing Day of that same year, which is concurrent to Dlamini's time in jail, and thus lends accurate reflection rather than mere conjecture.<sup>160</sup> Comprehending the dangers within the prison and keeping true to his reputation, Mattera believes Dlamini became a prison house bully and writes:

A mean looking man, his eyes red and bloodshot, stared at me. I stared back and he called me but I refused to go. He approached me and said in Zulu: "You look at King Kong and don't come when King Kong calls you, eh?" Before I could answer I lay sprawled against the wall, my mouth bleeding from a cut inside. The King's boot found a soft spot in my stomach and vomit cheated me of the morning's raw porridge and yellow fat, the piece of hard bread and the black weak coffee.... King nodded lazily and warned that I should never look at him again, or it would be worse the next time. I did not argue – besides there was no breath left in me.<sup>161</sup>

Mattera's recollection of his "King Kong" encounter further demonstrates the unpredictable nature of Dlamini. It also reaffirms Dlamini's reputation as a brute and bully.

Mattera's account further complicates our understanding of Dlamini in that he also points out that Dlamini possessed certain friends or allies in prison who were hardcore gangsters on the Reef. Mattera remembers that "Mamba," an adult member of the Berliners gang, intervened on his behalf and "saved me from further beating when he told the King [Dlamini] I was one of his boys."<sup>162</sup> Later in his writing, Mattera notes that Pietersen, an older gangster later hung for the rape and murder of a white petitioner, approached Dlamini and "spoke to him privately", after which Mattera notes Dlamini

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<sup>160</sup> Mattera, *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*, 108 and 113.

<sup>161</sup> Mattera, *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*, 119.

<sup>162</sup> Mattera, *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*, 119.

“treated me like one of his own family.”<sup>163</sup> Thus through Mattera’s account one grasps the complexities behind Dlamini, as it appears that he did not go out of his way to terrorize all gangsters; and, despite the press’s depiction to the contrary, he could apparently be appeased by even the most despicable of society.

After his acquittal in the Motlhabi case, Dlamini launched a boxing comeback and began by gearing up for a bout versus Potopoto Khoza (Khoza would later drop out and be replaced by Jackson Moloi) set for May 1956.<sup>164</sup> Trainers and the press portrayed this “King Kong” as renewed, disciplined, reformed and, perhaps most striking, reserved. Unlike previously in his career, he seemingly desired to maintain a lower profile; as he told *The World*, “I did not intend to make a noise about this [comeback]. I hate a lot of talk and I would rather do it on the quiet.” This desire not to “make a noise” could be due to the growing number of local black heavyweights, which Dlamini acknowledges: “I realise there is [a] lot of activity in the heavyweight class today.”<sup>165</sup>

Even with this lack of “noise,” interest in Dlamini’s return remained high, and many wanted to attend to “see if he has gained or lost in an absence of three years.”<sup>166</sup> In another article concerning Dlamini’s return to the boxing ring, he was referred to as “a man who was once feared because his punches carried dynamite.”<sup>167</sup> So much interest surrounded his return that 400 tickets were sold for his comeback fight two weeks prior

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<sup>163</sup> Mattera, *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*, 119.

<sup>164</sup> “King Kong prepares for come-back fight,” *The World* (Johannesburg), July 25, 1956; and “Fighting Policeman Wins Cruiserweight Championship,” *The World* (Johannesburg), August 22, 1956.

<sup>165</sup> “King Kong may box again,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 16, 1956.

<sup>166</sup> “King Kong-how will he shape?,” *The World* (Johannesburg), August 4, 1956.

<sup>167</sup> Caption to Potopoto Koza photo, *The World* (Johannesburg), July 25, 1956.

to the event, which forced promoters to move the fight outdoors, as the reserved hall could only seat 500 patrons.<sup>168</sup> One fan, a Mr. P. Senosi, reportedly traveled over 50 miles from Parys to Johannesburg to witness the return of “King Kong.”<sup>169</sup> Though Dlamini would go on to win, he apparently lacked “his reputed hard punching and stamina.... [and] showed signs of his long lay-off and seemed to tire.”<sup>170</sup> Regardless, the King had returned and fans continued to anticipate a triumphant return to his past glories.

As emblematic of this troubled heavyweight’s career, however, the glory of this triumphant comeback would only last briefly as he would brutally stab and kill his longtime girlfriend, Maria Miya,<sup>171</sup> at a dance held at the Polly Street Centre roughly a month after this bout.<sup>172</sup> When the police arrived to arrest Dlamini, he refused to drop his knife and was shot at five times<sup>173</sup> (though Nakasa’s retelling claims that only three of the bullets actually hit Dlamini).<sup>174</sup>

After a brief stay at Soweto’s Baragwanath hospital, the recovered Dlamini bounced between the Old Fort and Sterkfontein mental health facility. This period in

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<sup>168</sup> “King Kong fight in open,” *The World* (Johannesburg), August 11, 1956.

<sup>169</sup> “Fighting Policeman Wins Cruiserweight Championship,” *The World* (Johannesburg), August 22, 1956.

<sup>170</sup> “Fighting Policeman Wins Cruiserweight Championship,” *The World* (Johannesburg), August 22, 1956.

<sup>171</sup> Though little is known of Miya, we do know that she and Dlamini were romantic partners for a considerable amount of time, possibly even his wife as *The World* listed her as Maria Dlamini. See “Even if King Kong manages to escape the gallows Spoilers are after him,” *The World* (Johannesburg), October 13, 1956.

<sup>172</sup> “King Kong alleged to have stabbed woman to death,” *The World* (Johannesburg), October 10, 1956.

<sup>173</sup> “King Kong alleged to have stabbed woman to death,” *The World* (Johannesburg), October 10, 1956.

<sup>174</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.



state custody is particularly telling of his mental state as available documentation hints that he suffered from mental illness. Though Dlamini did not disturb prison wardens and staff during his previous incarcerations, his behavior seems to have altered dramatically, as he became extremely disruptive, even assaulting employees at both Baragwanath Hospital and the Fort. Many believed that he had “run mad in jail.”<sup>175</sup> Though Dlamini was considered eccentric and unique over most of his career, it now seems that this eccentricity may actually have been due to an undiagnosed mental illness. The state doubted his mental sanity and “ordered [Dlamini] to be admitted to the Sterkfontein Mental hospital for 28 days for observation”.<sup>176</sup> A later obituary for Dlamini pointed out that these same authorities found him “unstable”.<sup>177</sup>

Despite his dementia and status as an accused murderer, the press continued to project the image of Dlamini as an erratic eccentric whose behavior was humorous (despite him being accused of committing) a heinous crime. “‘King Kong’ wanted to keep fighting fit,” one paper reported, “so he chose an unwilling warden as sparring partner. But that only earned him a sentence of two months!”<sup>178</sup> Echoing similar sentiments, *The World* claimed:

Jail officials have had trouble with him ever since [*sic*] he arrived there. He had been assaulting other prisoners and chasing them about the cells. As a result he has had to be kept in his cell alone.

He does not mix well with others.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> “King Kong Performs in Jail,” *The World* (Johannesburg), December 19, 1956.

<sup>176</sup> “King Kong Performs in Jail,” *The World* (Johannesburg), December 19, 1956.

<sup>177</sup> Moses Casey Motsisi, “Hobo King of Kong,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1957.

<sup>178</sup> “Boxing Titles Shuffle Around Crazily In 1956,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), January 1957.

<sup>179</sup> “King Kong Performs in Jail,” *The World* (Johannesburg), December 19, 1956.

Thus we gain insight that the press was not going to let this storyline go, despite Dlamini's situation being more grave and serious than first imagined. As we will see, this popular depiction of Dlamini as theatrical, rambunctious, humorous and unpredictable would carry over into the reporting of his murder trial.

The unpredictable and tragic nature of Dlamini's story captivated the general public, and his trial aroused the interest of media outlets across languages and races.<sup>180</sup> Crowds packed the courtroom to see Dlamini, and though infused with poetic and lyrical license, Matshikiza writes, "His audience and spectators too, were confined to the constant belch from the bench, 'Silence in the Court.' Straining their necks to get a glance at the prisoner, a famous boxer, notorious extrovert, spectacular bum."<sup>181</sup>

Though Dlamini's trial was newsworthy and attracted interest from all corners of Johannesburg society, it would be fallacious to claim that it was the most newsworthy event of the time; one runs the risk of overstating the interest in the case by failing to note that the Treason Trial was taking place at roughly the same time.<sup>182</sup> Matshikiza notes in his own autobiography that he considered the task of reporting on Dlamini's trial a "little assignment."<sup>183</sup> Matshikiza also points out that his company did not even consider the

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<sup>180</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 110; and "King Kong gets 12 years for Murder, *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

<sup>181</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 110-1.

<sup>182</sup> Dlamini's trial lasted between 1956 and 1957. This period occurred at the same time as the Treason Trial, which lasted until 1961 and originally charged 156 political activists of various races with high treason.

<sup>183</sup> Matshikiza being a reporter on the case would later become vital to the musical. Though a reporter with both *Drum* magazine and the *Golden City Post*, Matshikiza was best known as the Reef's top music reviewer and well-respected pianist. This "little assignment" would blossom into something much bigger as Matshikiza would later be involved with coming up with the concept of the musical and compose the musical score.

assignment important enough for him to use the company car, which he claims was used in covering only the “big ones.”<sup>184</sup>

Despite being a “little assignment,” the case’s high profile and its courtroom dramatics caught the attention of the general public and the press. Summing up the atmosphere inside the courtroom, Matshikiza describes Dlamini’s testimony and courtroom behavior as “[t]he most sensational performance in all of King Kong’s ostentatious theatre in and out of the boxing ring.”<sup>185</sup> In *Chocolates*, Matshikiza describes Dlamini’s demeanor in the courtroom:

Eyes turned in the direction of the dock where the sound of pounding fists and stamping feet came. It was Kong, hands gripped tight against the handrails, feet stamping a violent, vicious beat on the floor, body jumping up and down like a gorilla, an angered giant-sized ape trying to set itself free. Now and again his fists would pound against the rails. His teeth clenched tight to stop him from shrieking out aloud, but in the end he could not resist yelling out loud, “It’s a lie, you lie, you lie!”<sup>186</sup>

This repeated defiance against any who stood in his way further emboldened his reputation of fearlessness in the minds of fans. The press itself echoed similar sentiments with *The World* reporting that Dlamini “acted throughout the trial as if he was in a boxing ring... When he entered the dock for the trial he waved his hat to his ‘fans’ and shuffled his feet as if he wa sabout [*sic*] to begin the first round.” The paper claimed that Dlamini even proclaimed inside the courtroom, “You police were foolish not to have shot and killed me when you arrested me,” and “I will not die in jail because one day I will escape when I feel like it.”<sup>187</sup> Accounts of this behavior only enhanced Dlamini’s mythical

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<sup>184</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 110.

<sup>185</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 110-1.

<sup>186</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 111.

<sup>187</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder,” *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

profile as it seemingly solidified in many South Africans the idea that no one could boss around the King, and neither the Spoilers, the police, the white judge, nor even the South African state, could intimidate this heavyweight.

As if out of the movies, the Spoilers would use the trial to settle an old score with Dlamini. “If King Kong escapes from the gallows he will not get away from a Spoilers’ knife,” *The World* proclaimed during the trial.<sup>188</sup> Harboring this ill will, the gang’s members willingly testified against Dlamini and made up many elements of the key testimony for the prosecution.

In court, Dlamini argued that Miya was conspiring with the Spoilers to kill him. Dlamini reportedly screamed during his sentencing, “I killed her because she was a spy for the Spoilers Gang who wanted to kill me.”<sup>189</sup> Dlamini also claimed that Miya had, in the words of *The World*, “flirted with Zorro, a member of the Spoilers Gang.”<sup>190</sup> Though Stan Motujwadi claimed in 1987 that *The World* reported, “the Spoilers had planned an attack on King Kong on the night of the killing of Maria,”<sup>191</sup> this article does not appear to exist and may be an instance where memory fails to provide an accurate depiction of history. These accusations seem farfetched, as it appears that Dlamini’s insanity blurs the truth of his testimony. *The World* reported that the judge did not believe his tale and that Dlamini’s response to the judge’s demand that he stick strictly to the events of October 6

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<sup>188</sup> “Even if King Kong manages to escape the gallows Spoilers are after him,” *The World* (Johannesburg), October 13, 1956.

<sup>189</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder, *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

<sup>190</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder, *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

<sup>191</sup> Stan Motujwadi, “Lest We Forget” in Jurgen Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa*, 6.

was “I get mixed up... I don’t want to say more. I told her that I would kill her because she spied on me but she still came to me... then I killed her.”<sup>192</sup>

On March 25, 1957, the court convicted Dlamini and sentenced him to twelve years for the murder of Miya.<sup>193</sup> The judge informed the court that he decided against a harsher sentence of hanging due to Dlamini’s “mental condition,” and further suggested that Dlamini may have suffered severely from a mental illness.<sup>194</sup> He would serve out the remainder of this life at Leeuwkop Farm Prison, a penitentiary north of Johannesburg.<sup>195</sup>

In terms of inmate treatment or safety, Leeuwkop Farm Prison was only marginally better than the Old Fort— as the press often reported, inmates were repeatedly poisoned or tortured during their time at the penitentiary.<sup>196</sup> Through accounts of his time at Leeuwkop prison,<sup>197</sup> it appears that Dlamini’s mental illness continued to plague him. and he allegedly committed suicide by drowning himself in the prison’s dammed

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<sup>192</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder, *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

<sup>193</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder, *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

<sup>194</sup> “King Kong gets 12 years for Murder, *The World* (Johannesburg), March 30, 1957.

<sup>195</sup> “Prisoner Poisoned In Jail,” *The World* (Johannesburg), April 20, 1957.

<sup>196</sup> “Prisoner Poisoned In Jail,” *The World* (Johannesburg), April 20, 1957; and Frank McGregor, “Jail Break!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1955.

<sup>197</sup> Dlamini appears twice (once in the Fort when standing trial for and once in Leewukop prison after his conviction of murdering Miya) in *Kortboy: A Sophiatown Legend* by Derrick Thema. In *Kortboy* blends creative writing and autobiography to present the life of George “Kortboy” Mpalweni, a notorious gangster and leader of the Americans gang. Since *Kortboy* is fictional account, the work cannot be considered a historically accurate account, but it remains important as it presents Dlamini’s experiences in prison. It remains unclear if Thema’s account of Dlamini in prison is a reflection of a fictional embellishment, Mpalweni’s own exaggerated account of experiences with Dlamini or historical fact. Thema’s presentation of Dlamini complicates the historical memory and legacy surrounding “Kong” by presenting him as a far more human figure (one that was not always defiant and sometimes suffered from dejection) than any other written account of Dlamini’s life, and thus why I may later include it in future revisions.

pond on April 3, 1957—just nine days after his receiving his sentence<sup>198</sup> Dlamini's death further contributed to the building of the "King Kong" legend, as his death, which most accepted to have been a suicide, was neither natural nor even due to ordinary causes.<sup>199</sup> *Drum*'s Motsisi commented, "He *had* to make even his death dramatic because King Kong was the very essence of drama—conflicting, full of movement, unpredictable."<sup>200</sup>

Even in death, Dlamini caused controversy. Prison authorities decided to grant Dlamini a public funeral rather than a simple burial on the Leeuwkop grounds, which was typical for "long-term prisoners". Additionally, the state may have paid for the public funeral for unstated reasons.<sup>201</sup> It was even claimed that his peers from Wolhuter Hostel were "hiring cars" (a considerable expense for migrant laborers) to both attend the funeral and send their friend off "in style."<sup>202</sup>

Aside from the tension over his burial, another controversy began brewing soon after Dlamini's death. Though witnesses saw him take his own life (Nakasa's 1959 article noted that Dlamini's suicide was witnessed by a "bunch of hard-labour convicts who saw him drown himself in a dam"), popular rumors spread that Dlamini's death was no suicide but indeed a murder.<sup>203</sup> Despite no tangible proof ever surfacing to corroborate this theory, many black South Africans believed (and continue to believe)

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<sup>198</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, "The Life and Death of KING KONG," *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>199</sup> Moses Casey Motsisi, "Hobo King of Kong," *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1957.

<sup>200</sup> Moses Casey Motsisi, "Hobo King of Kong," *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1957.

<sup>201</sup> "King Kong Gets A Public Funeral," *The World* (Johannesburg), April 13, 1957.

<sup>202</sup> "King Kong Gets A Public Funeral," *The World* (Johannesburg), April 13, 1957.

<sup>203</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, "The Life and Death of KING KONG," *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

that his death was neither a suicide nor an accident. Makeba remarks in her autobiography, “Everyone wants to know: How did this great strong man, six foot four, drown in a little pond of water, even in chains? We all suspect some foul play by the authorities.”<sup>204</sup> This theory seems unlikely, however, as one must wonder why the South African regime would target a non-political, relatively minor figure for assassination. Furthermore if his death was indeed a murder, it seems more probable that either prison guards or rival inmates, such as some of the Spoilers settling the score with “Kong,” were the culprits and thus presumably not part of a diabolical and elaborate scheme mastered by some sort of apartheid puppet masters.<sup>205</sup>

### **Kong Lives On As “South Africa’s James Dean”**

Following his death, popular memory of “King Kong” Dlamini morphed, and he evolved into a folk hero. He was no longer depicted as the “woman killer” that Mattera tells us but a downtrodden hero who battled life and ultimately lost.<sup>206</sup> The press’s obituaries often portrayed Dlamini more sympathetically than the typical murderer. Motsisi concluded his obituary of the fighter with:

“I’m well known all over the world,” he bellowed pathetically, hopefully perhaps, but untruthfully to a judge when he asked to be sentenced to death. But here he found himself a bum alone, unwanted, uncared for, despised and feared. He asked for a little consideration from life. Life

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<sup>204</sup> Makeba with Hall, *Makeba: My Story*, 68.

<sup>205</sup> Ironically, *Drum* reporter Nathaniel Nakasa would later commit suicide by jumping from a skyscraper in New York City and his death sparked similar rumors, debates and suspicions that agents for the South African government pushed Nakasa to his death. Taken together, these cases may demonstrate some sort of unconscious part of the collective black South African psyche in that unexplained deaths could be used to further embolden resistance to apartheid.

<sup>206</sup> Mattera, *Sophiatown: Coming of Age in South Africa*, 119.

said nix. He asked for companionship with death. Society said nuts! That did it. Imagine calling a “King” nuts! The “King” had to take that fatal drive.<sup>207</sup>

Now it was no longer Dlamini’s victim who garnered sympathy but the oafish bully and cold-blooded murderer himself. Thus one notices a profound attempt to mold popular memory of “King Kong,” either from the black press influencing the public or the press voicing the beliefs of local Africans.

Regardless of why this process took place, the growing disbelief at the manner of Dlamini’s death and seeming celebration of his life moved beyond the press and into popular culture. Roughly a month after his death Mabel Mafuya released a song concerning the now legendary “King Kong.” Mafuya’s tune became a hit and sold well. Writing on the domestic music industry, a *World* columnist wrote, “Take that thing about ‘King Kong.’ It’s [*sic*] sales value lies on [*sic*] the story which was exploited by newspapers—the death of boxer, King Kong. On the record the singers keep on repeating that he is dead! It’s selling like hot buns!”<sup>208</sup>

Beyond a hit tune, Mafuya’s song demonstrated King Kong’s popularity amongst the African population across the Rand and served to keep his memory alive. It also drew the notice of lawyer and author Harry Bloom, and Bloom credits Mafuya’s tune as the inspiration for the Union of Southern African Artists to create a musical around Dlamini’s life. “Soon a song in his praise was sweeping through the township,” Bloom

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<sup>207</sup> Moses Casey Motsisi, “Hobo King of Kong,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1957.

<sup>208</sup> Usiyazi, “Talk of the World,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 25, 1957.



recounts, “and it was this ballad that made us see that King Kong had become a legend only a few weeks after his death.”<sup>209</sup>

Even after his funeral and the release of the “King Kong” tune, Dlamini’s legend showed no signs of dissipating. In a sense, it would loom larger than the grizzled giant ever had, and it, not he, emerged essentially as a cultural phenomenon. Aside from the *King Kong* musical, his legend lived on in the tales of his outlandish behavior. “He received more adulation [in death] than he ever knew in life. His stubborn refusal to compromise became an inspiration to Africans struggling for emancipation,” Bloom writes in the foreword to the *King Kong* book, “and many saw him as a symbol of the wasted powers of the African people.”<sup>210</sup> To many, “King” represented a sympathetic persona for Johannesburg’s black population at large, as he personified many of the themes of the turbulent 1950s: the struggle of rural migrants to the big city, the backlash against gangsters that shaped black life throughout Johannesburg, and the sense of looming downfall and tragedy that faced any African, whether a politician, musician or miner under an unjust apartheid regime.

His legend resurfaced and grew over time, particularly as the unveiling of the *King Kong* musical neared. “Within two years [after his death] a legend has emerged round the man,” noted Nat Nakasa in 1959.<sup>211</sup> Included with Nakasa’s story was a

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<sup>209</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in *King Kong: The superb African jazz opera*, 13-14.

<sup>210</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in *King Kong: The superb African jazz opera*, 13.

<sup>211</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

caption to a photograph referring to the late fighter as “South Africa’s James Dean.”<sup>212</sup> To Nakasa, Dlamini would have cherished the fact that his life was discussed by so many people; as he wrote, “That is as he would have wished. That the whole land should remember his death. That the whole land should remember the strange, fabulous incidents that crowded the 32-year life of ‘Lightning Marshal.’”<sup>213</sup> Echoing his peer Motsisi’s article two year earlier, Nakasa spun Dlamini’s tale as a tragic but sympathetic one: “It was the dull, disciplined life of jail he must have hated. In the outside world he was constantly surrounded by crowds of people. People who talked about his fame and his might. This admiration was part of his life.”<sup>214</sup> Thus Nakasa’s piece inferred not only Dlamini was a man taken before his time but also one that commanded as well as received the respect and admiration of the people rather than the brutal, buffoonish, humorous oaf as which he was once depicted.

Not all magazine readers and boxing fans, however, accepted these idealized descriptions of Dlamini’s life. They remembered him as a bully, criminal and murderer. One angered *Drum* reader, “Plaasman,” wrote, “Why should you make such a fuss of King Kong? He was not a hero. He was a prisoner, a convicted criminal who couldn’t take it... How can we teach people that crime is wrong when all the time criminals are shown as great men? I think the best that can be done is for people to be taught that

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<sup>212</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>213</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>214</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

ruffians like King Kong do no serve the interests of the public.”<sup>215</sup> Thus one notices that not all locals were willing to accept and immortalize Dlamini as a tragic hero but instead viewed him as a nuisance and criminal. Despite these sorts of beliefs, many latched onto Dlamini as a folk hero.

As time progressed, Dlamini’s life has been used to demonstrate both the harsh nature and turbulence associated with 1950s apartheid South Africa. In Jurgen Schadeburg’s *Fifties People*, reporter Stan Motjuwadi notes “that zany character [Dlamini] whom I think epitomizes the craziness of the time.”<sup>216</sup> However, many of the factors surrounding his life have become rather distorted. Though some attribute Nakasa’s biographical article appearing in *Drum* as the reason for his prominent recollection, the Nakasa story appeared roughly a month before the musical’s opening and thus Dlamini’s story was old news by the time Nakasa’s story was published. Due to its timing, one must consider the story as a ploy to publicize the upcoming musical, as an effort to familiarize audiences to the story behind the play, or as *Drum*’s attempt to use the excitement surrounding the musical, to bump up sales.

Another misconception around Dlamini deals with his ability as a fighter. Though once the dominant heavy of his era, it seems that he probably could not have competed against the best international heavies. From reading Miriam Makeba’s recollection of Dlamini in her autobiography, *Makeba: My Story*, it is clear how popular memory distorted the image of “King Kong.” She describes Dlamini as “a great, strong man who

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<sup>215</sup> “Plaasman,” “King Kong,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1959.

<sup>216</sup> Motjuwadi, “Lest We Forget,” in Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa*, 6.

knocked down everyone he fought,”<sup>217</sup> and also claims that the tragedy behind Dlamini’s life was that “the authorities would not let him continue his fighting... [and] travel overseas, where his true competition was.”<sup>218</sup> From Makeba’s accounting, Dlamini appears as a tragic figure robbed of his chance at true boxing glory by the evil apartheid state, rather than the more probable explanation that he simply was not disciplined or good enough to compete internationally.

Though Dlamini’s behavior was eccentric and unpredictable, it seems his flair for self-publicity may now be overstated in current popular history. In remembering a peer on *Drum* magazine, for instance, Basil “Doc” Bikitsha writes, “When Ezekiel ‘King Kong’ Dlamini was arrested for murder, he insisted that only Bob [Gosani] be allowed to take his picture.”<sup>219</sup> While Bikitsha remains a nearly indisputable authority on the era, this statement appears untrue, as photographs of Dlamini appeared in various magazines and periodicals. Similarly Nakasa’s recounting of the Kong story inserts that it was Dlamini’s “request” to be locked up at the Fort, which too seems highly unlikely since that was the main holding cell for longtime prisoners in the area.<sup>220</sup> Examples like Bikitsha’s anecdote personify the mythological afterlife that Dlamini’s legend took on after his death, which ultimately continues even today, and so shaped society that it inspired the making of a jazz musical.

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<sup>217</sup> Makeba with Hall, *Makeba: My Story*, 68.

<sup>218</sup> Makeba with Hall, *Makeba: My Story*, 68.

<sup>219</sup> Doc Bikitsha, “Foreword” in Mthobisi Mutloatse and Jacqui Masiza, eds., *Tauza: Bob Gosani’s People* (Johannesburg: Mutloatse Heritage Trust 2004), 12.

<sup>220</sup> Nathaniel Nakasa, “The Life and Death of KING KONG,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

## Chapter Two

### **“Back of the Moon”: Entertaining the Possibility of a New South Africa**

The 1950s were a contentious and tumultuous period in South African history. With the Nationalist Party obtaining control of the national government in 1948, South Africa embarked on a new phase in its history as this marked the formal legislation and enacting of apartheid. The decade witnessed a flurry of significant legislation, such as the Suppression of Communism Act,<sup>1</sup> the Group Areas Act,<sup>2</sup> the Immorality Amendment Act,<sup>3</sup> the Criminal Law Amendment Act,<sup>4</sup> the Bantu Education Act,<sup>5</sup> and the Natives (Urban Areas) Amendment Act, in addition to various pass laws that deeply restricted

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<sup>1</sup> Passed in 1950, this provision banned the South African Communist Party. See “Important Legislation of Recent Years,” in *State of the Union: Economic, Financial and Statistical Year-Book for the Union of South Africa, 1959-60* (Johannesburg: Da Gama Publications, 1960), 54.

<sup>2</sup> The Groups Areas Act (1950) established “provision for gradual introduction of residential segregation” according to race. Further legislation in 1957 strengthened the state’s power and facilitated “the establishment of group areas, the control of the acquisition of immovable property and the occupation of land and premises. See “Important Legislation of Recent Years,” in *State of the Union*, 54-6

<sup>3</sup> The Immorality Amendment Act (1950) prohibited “sex relations between Whites and non-Whites” which made it illegal for any individual to have sexual relations with someone of another race. It strengthened previous legislation that, such as the Mixed Marriages Act (1949), that banned inter-racial marriages and prohibited sexual relations between Africans and whites. See “Important Legislation of Recent Years,” in *State of the Union*, 54.

<sup>4</sup> This law (1953) was designed to curb anti-apartheid activism and criminalized “resistance campaign offences and for offering and receiving financial support for such resistance.” See “Important Legislation of Recent Years,” in *State of the Union*, 54.

<sup>5</sup> The Bantu Education Act (1955) transferred “control of Bantu education” to the Native Affairs Department. A year later, a further amendment passed that forced all schools serving African populations to register with the Department of Native Affairs, who would determine if each school “thereof is not in the interest of the Bantu people.” These provisions effectively dismantled missionary and private schools whose education was too progressive for the state’s liking. See “Important Legislation of Recent Years,” in *State of the Union*, 54-5.

black life and anti-apartheid activism across South Africa.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 156 political dissidents from various organizations working against the state's policies were charged with "High Treason"; the trial, as a result, became popularly referred to as the Treason Trial, and it lasted nearly five years.

Beyond curbing political activism, apartheid policies possessed even more significant ramifications on the Rand. The Bantu Education Act effectively shut down local schools like St. Peter's College that produced many of the most able, affluent and competent members of African society in Johannesburg. In February 1955, the state began relocating residents of the non-European neighborhoods of Sophiatown, Newclare and Western Native Township to locations outside of the city, mainly Soweto, under the auspices of the Group Areas Act. As Sophiatown was Johannesburg's hub of African cultural life and interracial mixing, its destruction was a particularly harsh blow.

Almost contradictory to actual events taking place, the period simultaneously birthed fervent and lively opposition, which South African author Lewis Nkosi describes as "of thrust, never of withdrawal."<sup>7</sup> He further contends that "it seemed not extravagant in the least to predict then that the Nationalist Government would soon collapse, if not from the pressure of the extra-parliamentary opposition, certainly from the growing volume of unenforceable laws."<sup>8</sup> Despite increased crackdowns and harassment by the

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<sup>6</sup> This act (1956) authorized "local authorities to order Natives whose presence in a certain area is detrimental to the maintenance of peace and order to leave such area." As such, it effectively gave the government the right to banish Africans that it deemed unruly or political troublemakers to rural areas, regardless of where they were born and grew up. See "Important Legislation of Recent Years," in *State of the Union*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longman's, 1965), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 23.

state, anti-apartheid organizers faced growing support from their respective communities and co-operation between groups. It was during this period that organized liberal and radical movements, such as the Liberal Party, African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and Congress of Democrats, took off and seemingly gained increased sway within domestic politics. Activism and demonstrations on “open” university campuses, such as the University of Cape Town, Grahamstown’s Rhodes University, and Johannesburg’s University of the Witwatersrand, additionally seemed to signify that better times lay ahead.

Thus, in spite of the state’s desire to foster divisions within society and maintain society’s racial hierarchy, the decade was also one of further racial interaction and understanding (or that was, at least, what many perceived). “Everywhere, members of my own generation, both black and white,” notes Nkosi, “were beginning to disaffiliate from a society organised on a rigid apartheid design. We began to sense that we were being deprived of a profounder experience; a sense of a shared nationhood.”<sup>9</sup> It was this desire for “a shared nationhood” that *King Kong* represented.

Into an era of the apartheid policies that pervaded nearly every level of South African society entered a “jazz opera” that positioned itself as “an inter-racial venture” and that all parties within South Africa, black or white, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, could partake in, enjoy and celebrate without fear of political reprisals or social

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<sup>9</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 40.

banishment.<sup>10</sup> To white South Africans, *King Kong* introduced them to an unknown world that was life in the African townships and where the copious amounts of talent and creativity simmered beyond the ignorance of mainstream white society. For African audiences, the play signified European recognition of their artists, their art, and their creativity in spite of apartheid—and by extension African achievement or worthiness at large.

For many of various colors and backgrounds, *King Kong* represented the possibility of a different South African society where such cross-cultural and cross-racial productions would be the norm rather than the exception, and through them understanding and acceptance could be fostered. Detailing this “era of multi-racialism”, Stephen Clingman writes in *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*:

If the intent of the apartheid government was to prove some misguided point about God-given racial hierarchies and distinctions, then the anti-apartheid movement would show through its most intimate gestures as much as its wider institutional structures that not only were racial co-operation and harmony possible... In a wider social and cultural sphere other energies reinforced the political, as racial boundaries were transgressed in everything from the jazz opera *King Kong*, which took Johannesburg by storm, to the drinking life of the shebeens of Sophiatown...<sup>11</sup>

It was of this era that *King Kong* was born and epitomized. “*King Kong* represented at once an ultimate achievement and final flowering of Sophiatown culture,” anthropologist David Coplan argues, “a typically sturdy South African ‘hybrid’ that the devotees of racial and cultural purity and separation were determined to root out.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mona De Beer, “Publisher’s Preface,” in *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre* (Cape Town: Norman Howell, 2001), no page number.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 193.

<sup>12</sup> David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 217.



Expressing similar thoughts, ticket-selling mogul Percy Tucker claims that the “genesis” of *King Kong* “is to be found in a history of events and a consensus of ideals (and ideas) that coalesced at the right time.”<sup>13</sup> While each group often focused on particular aspects of the musical and its larger meanings, *King Kong*’s ability to reach across the spectrum of South African society (over a decade after apartheid’s creation) is nothing short of remarkable and complicates our understanding of South African society under apartheid. Within the production itself, the play symbolized inter-racial effort with its African cast and composer guided by white producers, directors and funders. The musical seemingly disproved the notion that such interactions and innovation could never succeed within such a highly racialized society as 1950s South Africa.

This chapter interrogates the making and reception of this seminal South African musical. It is through *King Kong* that one witnesses fissures within South African society that potentially signaled or intimated the burgeoning opinion within its citizenry to reevaluate society’s status quo (while perhaps not the complete dismantling of apartheid). This chapter argues that *King Kong*’s creation and popular reception demonstrate that such modes of mutual acceptance went far beyond the grasp of white radicals and African nationalists to reach the general public. With between 120,000 to 200,000 South Africans of all colors having seen the show between 1959 and 1960—despite its showing only in the nation’s largest cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban,

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<sup>13</sup> Percy Tucker, *Just the Ticket!: My 50 Years in Show Business* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1997), 127.

and eventually Pretoria—*King Kong* brought theatre in South Africa to levels never previously witnessed before.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Establishment of the Union of Southern African Artists**

During the early 1950s, trade union organizer Guy Routh and local advertising executive Ian Bernhardt, with the aid of lawyer Harry Bloom, secured the payment of royalties to a number of African artists, most notably Solomon Linda, composer of “Mbube,” a song which was repackaged into the internationally acclaimed hit “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” by the Weavers in 1951.<sup>15</sup> In a grand ceremony organized by Routh and Bernhardt celebrating this achievement, many prominent African musicians and performers participated and the Union of Southern African Artists (USAA) was born out of this occasion.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to the establishment of the USAA, African musicians and singers amassed widespread popularity across both South Africa and the larger region of Southern Africa throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Their lives, however, were not easy. Though an African performer’s “hit” record could sell over 100,000 records, these entertainers

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<sup>14</sup> A significant figure considering *Kong*’s limited run in each city and that the event was presumably priced high enough to turn away a high percentage of the working classes. Additionally, the total population of South Africa by 1960 was estimated by the South African government at just over 16 million and the total of population of these particular cities at roughly 4.5 million. See Table 5 (b) in Republic of South Africa, *Population Census of 6 September, 1960, Volume 1: General Distribution of the Population* (Pretoria: Republic of South Africa Bureau of Statistics, 1963), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, (2008), 213; and Harry Bloom, “Foreword” in Harry Bloom, *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (London: Collins, 1961), 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Joe Mogotsi, with Pearl Connor, *Mantindane ‘He Who Survives’: My Life with The Manhattan Brothers* (Copenhagen: The Booktrader, 2002), 60; and Bloom, “Foreword,” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 9-10.

received little in terms of financial compensation.<sup>17</sup> Many lived “very much from day to day, earning a few guineas one week and nothing the next.”<sup>18</sup> Like the experience of boxers analyzed in chapter one, no non-European musician or singer could support themselves and their families solely from their musical careers, and thus they often worked as teachers, nurses, salesmen, clerks, waiters, journalists, talent scouts, domestic servants, and delivery “boys.”

Beyond their financial struggles, African entertainers faced additional dangers. With performances taking place at night and often involving travel, they found themselves the target of both police and criminals. “Moving as they do in the rough-and-tumble world of the shantytowns and locations, often regarded as the wonder-boys of jive-mad tsotsis,” a writer for *Contact* summed up the collective experience of black performers, “some musicians take to drink or drugs. Hard times come, and the police follow. If they play for dances their lives are cheap, many finish with a knife in their backs and their saxophone or trumpet stolen.”<sup>19</sup>

With such a dire situation for performers, the USAA’s creation was welcomed by many, as it could offer them protection and opportunity. Like the performers themselves, the USAA initially struggled to remain financially afloat. With paltry dues of a “shilling-a-month” per member, it possessed little capital to provide much for its membership, and it reportedly ran often with a “bank account of £23.”<sup>20</sup> To compound matters further,

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<sup>17</sup> “Apartheid Puts African Jazz,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1958, Volume 14, Number 7.

<sup>18</sup> “Players Off Beat,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1958.

<sup>19</sup> “Players Off Beat,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1958.

<sup>20</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 8.

Routh returned to his native Britain shortly after the union's formation and thus left Bernhardt to run the USAA.<sup>21</sup> Despite Bernhardt's "flair for show business", the USAA continued to flounder.

The USAA's existence was renewed in 1954 when the Anglican Church recalled Bishop Trevor Huddleston, however. A British priest who worked against apartheid and sponsored various services for Africans, Huddleston amassed a significant following beyond just his Sophiatown parishioners, and became a beloved figure within African society.<sup>22</sup> His departure was seen as a pivotal event to Johannesburg's black community as well as white liberal activists, and the USAA-organized farewell concert featured over 200 musicians and singers with over 2,000 people in attendance. As the event's sponsor, the USAA grossed between £2,000 to 4,000, which ultimately "provided the means to acquire permanent premises in Dorkay House."<sup>23</sup>

With its new permanent base of operation in Dorkay House (centrally located in downtown Johannesburg on 100 Eloff Street extension) and a significantly inflated bankroll, the USAA flourished and found itself as "a powerful force," as member of the Manhattan Brothers Joe Mogotsi claims, within African-based show business.<sup>24</sup> After

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<sup>21</sup> Bloom claims in his foreword that Routh was forced out of his job with the Industrial Council by the South African government. See Bloom "Foreword," in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Due to his activism, Huddleston was one of the first recipients of the Isitwalandwe, the ANC's highest honor, with Albert Luthuli and Yusuf Daidoo at the signing of the Freedom Charter in 1955. On a more personal note, both Hugh Masekela and bandleader Peter Reznant claim that the Huddleston's removal altered the devotion to their Christian faiths. See Muff Andersson, *Music in the mix: the story of South African popular music* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), 30; and "Isitwalandwe/Seaparankoe the Highest Award of Honour," <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/awards/> (accessed on May 9, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (2008), 213; and Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 60.

securing royalties for some performers and arranging deals with British Equity (the British actor's union) as well as various visiting foreign performers to play shows for non-European audiences,<sup>25</sup> the USAA emerged in the eyes of many African performers as a legitimate way to protect their interests, secure gigs, ward off abuse by recording companies and promoters, and, according to *Drum* journalist Can Themba, "bring to light the cream of Non-European talent."<sup>26</sup> Through the work of the organization, record companies and promoters began offering musicians better pay by the conclusion of the 1950s.<sup>27</sup> Dorkay House became, according to Hugh Masekela, "buzzing with artists scurrying for appointments, musicians leaning against their horn cases, hoping to land a gig, or just practicing on their instruments playing jazz cover tunes and original compositions in one or the other small rehearsal rooms."<sup>28</sup>

With Bernhardt's own interest in theatre, the USAA formed "The Bareti Players," an all-black theatrical group, and through the group, it offered organized theatre with casts of non-Europeans, with its most prominent being an "all-black" production of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.<sup>29</sup> These programs were largely unpopular and did little to swell the union's coffers. Following a format already put forth by Alfred

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<sup>25</sup> Later on, Bernhardt was crucial in petitioning such groups to refuse to play in segregated venues. See Bloom, "Foreword," in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (2008), 213; Bloom, "Foreword," in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 9-10; and Can Themba, "Dolly," *Drum*, April 1957.

<sup>27</sup> "Apartheid Puts African Jazz," *Contact* (Johannesburg), Volume 14, No. 7 (May 4, 1958).

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Masekela with D. Michael Cheers, *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (New York: Crown Publishers), 94.

<sup>29</sup> Bernhardt was earlier a member of The Dramateers, a Johannesburg-based amateur white theatrical collective. For more on Bernhardt's career see Lionel Slier, "King Kong and the Jewish Connection," *Jewish Affairs*, Volume 61, Number 4 (Chanukah 2006) : 69; and De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 7-9.

Herbert's *African Jazz and Variety* and the sendoff for Huddleston, however, the USAA embarked on a new format, a series of concerts (under the name *Township Jazz*) and talent contests beginning in 1956.<sup>30</sup> These "highly successful" programs served to promote its performers and provide them with regular gigs while also facilitating the union's growth as an organization by allowing it to secure the best of local black show business talent.<sup>31</sup> Sensing the deeper impact on South Africa and performance across the nation, Matshikiza noted in a *Drum* column that *Township Jazz* offered a "clean face for the City Hall, a change of heart inside, and a bright future for Township Jazz and the men who made it."<sup>32</sup> Matshikiza's reviews of the program offer a unique glimpse into his own beliefs concerning the USAA, its *Township Jazz* events, and the ability of black music to further racial integration.

For some white South Africans, such evenings introduced them to African performers, such as Dolly Rathebe, the Manhattan Brothers and Miriam Makeba, already popular amongst African populations across the Reef, if not the entire country. Former *Drum* editor Sylvester Stein writes of first witnessing the Manhattan Brothers at Trevor Huddleston's farewell concert in 1955: "[T]hey did instantly score a tremendous reach with me. I shook my head—here they were in my own country, as great a jazz team as any of those I'd admired in the United States yet I'd been quite unaware of their existence

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<sup>30</sup> *African Jazz* was a variety show that regularly toured Southern Africa that featured many of South Africa's most prominent performers. Though quite successful and Herbert possessed many backers within the musician community, employment with him often was a trying experience as he regularly lost the pay through poor investments and a gambling addiction. For more on *African Jazz and Variety*, see Makeba, with Nomsa Mwamuka, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 43; and Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 90-3.

<sup>31</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (2008), 213; and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 60.

<sup>32</sup> Todd Matshikiza, "Shantytown in City Hall!" *Drum* (Johannesburg), August 1956.

and of their very records, which sold to the South African blacks by the lorry-load! Blacks to us as ever were the invisible men.”<sup>33</sup> Many future members of *King Kong*’s white production and conceptual teams became “enthralled by these young performers” and these concerts ultimately served as inspiration for much of the *King Kong* musical itself.<sup>34</sup>

With this point made, it is vital to note that despite the popularity of *Township Jazz* and *African Jazz and Variety* amongst white audiences, these “isolated efforts” failed to truly transcend into mainstream white South African society.<sup>35</sup> “Outside of Durban,” writes one reporter in 1958, “European jazz enthusiasts display little interest in African jazz while the general run of the African public has not advanced beyond the popular Marabi rhythms of three decades ago.”<sup>36</sup> For the USAA to reach wider audiences, it needed to channel these energies “into something bigger, more important and more lasting” and develop a format that lent itself to drawing a larger portion of Johannesburg’s white communities.<sup>37</sup>

After one *Township Jazz* concert in 1957, Bernhardt and Bloom (and soon thereafter joined by Anglo-Vaal executive Clive Menell and his wife)<sup>38</sup> contemplated expanding on the *Township Jazz* format and thus “began turning over the idea of producing a full-scale musical, the first of its kind in Africa, that would express not just

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<sup>33</sup> Sylvester Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?: A Historical Caprice* (London: Corvo, 2003), 188-9.

<sup>34</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket!*, 127-8.

<sup>35</sup> “Players Off Beat,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1958.

<sup>36</sup> “Players Off Beat,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1958.

<sup>37</sup> Slier, “*King Kong* and the Jewish Connection,” 69.

<sup>38</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11; and Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 94.

the music, but the drama, colour and effervescence, as well as the poignancy and sadness, that made the peculiar flavour of township life.”<sup>39</sup> Having composed the novel *Transvaal Episode*, which received the Britain’s Authors Club First Novel Award in 1957, about a riot in a fictional township set during the ANC’s defiance campaign (1952), Bloom possessed an impressive background in putting African stories into literary forms, as well as a reputation within the South African literary community.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, Bloom enjoyed a robust reputation for sympathizing with the plight of Africans under apartheid, as he ran the only legal office in Alexandra by 1954 and regularly petitioned on the behalf of Africans and African-based causes against the apartheid state.<sup>41</sup> This closeness and affinity for the African struggle under apartheid introduced Bloom to the fact that music often accompanied major political events like bus boycotts, riots and political trials. He credits these songs for writing an African-themed musical as he states, “The idea of doing *King Kong* owes its origin to just such a song.”<sup>42</sup> Combined with his literary reputation, Bloom seemed a near-ideal candidate to lead any major theatrical production that Bernhardt-led USAA had been contemplating.

Originally seeking to “write a series of vignettes strung together by a calypso-style singer with a guitar,” Bloom decided to base this production around the tale of Ezekiel “King Kong” Dlamini’s after following how Dlamini’s image had been

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<sup>39</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 11.

<sup>40</sup> Harry Bloom, “The Novel & The Nation,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), August 8, 1959; and Margaret Kannemeyer, “Our Dual Inheritance: The British Heritage in South Africa,” *The Black Sash* (Johannesburg), March 1958, Volume 3, Number 4.

<sup>41</sup> Tom Hopkinson, “King Kong is Coming,” *The Observer Weekend Review* (London), January 29, 1961; Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 107; “The Soccer Apartheid Fight Nears Showdown Stage,” *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1953; and ES, “Review of *Football in Africa*,” *Sechaba*, February 2, 1987.

<sup>42</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 8.



converted into a township myth through the African press. Bloom realized that this tale possessed a combination of, in the words of Tucker, “the vibrancy of township life, its glamour and its squalor, laughter and tears, and the dark underside of tragedy.”<sup>43</sup> Soon afterwards the USAA announced that it would be presenting an African-based theatrical musical, described by *The World* as “A ‘Carmen Jones’ for the city”, “centered around recent events in the Union.”<sup>44</sup> This announcement indicated a meshing of the Union’s interests of supporting local music and theatre. Fusing these two interests, the USAA sought “to produce a story of the caliber of ‘Carmen Jones.’”<sup>45</sup>

### **Todd Matshikiza: An African Composing the All-African Musical**

In contemplating a musical about urban African life on the Reef, the USAA sought an African composer who could capture the mood of the Johannesburg townships and best utilize the musical talent of the black performers who would comprise the cast and backing band.<sup>46</sup> Such an individual needed to read and write music, be able to actually compose an entire score that could accompany a theatrical production, and, most importantly, know various popular black music forms. (Often musicians preferred one particular genre, such as local *mbaqanga*, *marabi*, or pure American-style jazz, over another.)

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<sup>43</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 128; and De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> “A ‘Carmen Jones’ for the city,” *The World* (Johannesburg), February 22, 1958.

<sup>45</sup> “A ‘Carmen Jones’ for the city,” *The World* (Johannesburg), February 22, 1958.

<sup>46</sup> This role appears to have been the one position within the production team that the play’s organizers believed either needed to or could be filled by African, as all other directors, choreographers, designers, etc. were white.

Matshikiza's background made him a near ideal candidate. Coming from a family full of deeply talented musicians, he enjoyed a notable career in music,<sup>47</sup> and he frequently toured with Johannesburg's most respected music acts, including the Harlem Swingsters and the Manhattan Brothers, throughout the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>48</sup> In addition, Matshikiza had already composed numerous noteworthy tunes throughout the decades, including "Uxolo" (a choral piece commissioned for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Johannesburg's founding where it was performed by 200-person choir and full orchestra),<sup>49</sup> "Hamba Kahle" (dedicated to a fallen friend and later popularly adopted as a song sang at African funerals),<sup>50</sup> "Ityala lamadoda" (an ode to two men, *Drum* reporter Henry Nxumalo and Rand celebrity Victor Mkize, who faced untimely deaths, which was renamed "Sad Times, Bad Times" and subsequently included in the *King Kong* score),<sup>51</sup> and "Makhalipile" (a song honoring missionary and Sophiatown icon Trevor Huddleston).<sup>52</sup> With such accomplishments, Matshikiza had already amassed a significant resume by the early conceptual stages of *King Kong* in 1957. "At least on a

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<sup>47</sup> Matshikiza's parents were amateur performers, his brother Meekly became a notable professional musician throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and his nephew (Meekly's son), Pat, emerged as one of South Africa's most recognized jazz musicians from the 1960s onwards. See Sam Maile, "The Music Box," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), May 1951; Anthony Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005), 69-71; Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*; and John Matshikiza, "Prologue: notes of a journey towards a biographical exploration," unpublished paper presented to the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, <http://wiserverweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/wirs%20-%20matshikiza.PDF> (accessed December 11, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 13; Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 94; and Sam Maile, "The Music Box," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), May 1951.

<sup>49</sup> See Bloke Modisane, "Matshikiza Makes Music," *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1956.

<sup>50</sup> Sampson claims that Matshikiza composed the song for the Queen Mother's arrival to Bulawayo but this assertion is incorrect in Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Miriam Makeba with Nomsa Mwamuka, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 38-9.

<sup>52</sup> Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 142.

South African level he shouldn't be any different from George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers, Jules Stein, Rogers and Hart... he was in the same class," Masekela would later describe him to Muff Anderson.<sup>53</sup>

Beyond his personal accomplishments in music, Matshikiza carved a significant career as a music reviewer for *Drum* and its sister publication *Golden City Post* during the 1950s. According to his former editor Anthony Sampson, Matshikiza's contribution "transformed" these papers as "[h]e [Matshikiza] wrote as he spoke, in a brisk tempo with rhythm in every sentence. He attacked the typewriter like a piano. Our readers loved 'Matshikese', as we called it, which was the way they talked and thought, beating in time with the jazz within them."<sup>54</sup> Through his experience, he further amassed a widely intimate knowledge of the best musicians and singers across the country, as well as virtually all popular musical forms like *mbaqanga*, *marabi*, *kwela* and pure jazz in addition to classical European forms due to his formal music training.<sup>55</sup> This position subsequently launched him as the nation's most recognized authority on black music regardless of genre.<sup>56</sup>

Aside from reviewing music, he also served as a reporter and cultivated a keen awareness of the African experience under apartheid, which caused Masekela to "place him alongside Can Themba in terms of his concept and perspective on the real South

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<sup>53</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Maile, "The Music Box," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), May 1951, 33.

<sup>56</sup> In addition to other music-related activities like being a member of the Johannesburg Bantu Music Festival committee and teaching piano at the Bantu Men's Social Centre. See Maile, "The Music Box," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), May 1951, 33.

African.”<sup>57</sup> Particularly interested in the topics that such a musical about Dlamini could logically tackle, Matshikiza had already amassed an intimate understanding of the brute due to his own experience covering Dlamini’s murder trial, which could provide further details about the boxer-turned murderer and presumably aid Bloom in capturing the essence of “King Kong.” Observing his father’s qualifications for composing *King Kong*’s score, John Matshikiza writes:

The man [Todd] understood his central character, and, more importantly, understood the whole world that surrounded ‘King Kong’. He understood the whole black world of the townships that fed Johannesburg, and the histories of the people who filled those townships. He *lived* there! Being a country boy’ who was drawn to the City of Gold, there was much of ‘King Kong’s’ background that was obvious to him.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore Matshikiza possessed a nearly ideal background to compose the score for this musical based on the life of Ezekiel Dlamini set in the African townships.

Aside from knowing the townships, he also knew the world beyond them. Schooled (even graduating from the prestigious Adam’s College), and eventually teaching within missionary schools, adhering to many Xhosa traditions and deeply appreciative of black American music, Matshikiza was, according to Sampson, “a man of two worlds” in that his life seemed to epitomize the mishmash of indigenous African and Western (both European and American) influences present within black urban society.<sup>59</sup> “With his genius for friendship, and his musical talents, he moved easily among

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<sup>57</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> John Matshikiza, “An incomplete masterpiece waiting in the wings,” *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), February 5-11, 1999.

<sup>59</sup> Sampson relays a story of Matshikiza’s during his Xhosa initiation into manhood that captures the black South African adoption of American culture: “He lay alone in the hut, sleeping with only an old blanket on the hard floor. He could hear his brother playing Duke Ellington in the house. ‘It was a wonderful time,’ said Todd. ‘I felt completely at peace.’” See Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 69-71.

Europeans. Yet, unlike most urban Africans,” Sampson continues, “he had never rejected his tribal roots, and took pride in them.”<sup>60</sup> Though he certainly possessed gripes and reservations with the white liberal community, the cultured, refined and intelligent Matshikiza possessed many friends, acquaintances and connections in this segment of society.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps more importantly in Johannesburg’s creative world where contacts and friendships often led to opportunity, he already possessed significant connections to both Bernhardt (due to his composition for Trevor Huddleston as well as his friendship with former *Drum* co-worker Benjamin “Gwigwi” Mrwebi, who by 1958 served as secretary for the USAA) and Bloom (who had represented Matshikiza for a liquor arrest years earlier) fairly well.<sup>62</sup>

Soon after learning of Dlamini’s death, Bloom approached Matshikiza to compose the score to *King Kong*. While accompanying Bloom and “a [white] girl from Illono” on a tour of Alexandra, Bloom told Matshikiza “on the way I wan’ to discuss with you the possibilities of doing a musical on the notorious King Kong. Would you be interested in writing the music?”<sup>63</sup> This opportunity perhaps could not have come at a better moment for Matshikiza, as he had hit an artistic low point and had drifted out of both writing and music to work primarily as a “razorblade salesman on the rough streets

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<sup>60</sup> Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Matshikiza did possess strong reservations and gripes against whites, especially South Africa’s British liberal population, as both Stein and Sampson make note of this sentiment in their memoirs. See Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 121; and Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, 63-5 and 214-5.

<sup>62</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 104.

<sup>63</sup> This “girl” possibly was Irene Menell as he claims that she remarked, “Come and practise at my home” and Matshikiza eventually composed much of the play’s music at her home. See Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 116-7.

of Soweto.”<sup>64</sup> He therefore presumably welcomed the opportunity to compose the score to this potentially historic African musical.

Though Matshikiza often claimed that he easily composed the score,<sup>65</sup> the process itself apparently was more painful than Matshikiza let on, and as the historical record indicates, he worked incredibly hard on the score. “Todd had the energy of two beavers...always rushing. In his talk, walk, eating and creating musical masterpieces. But when Harry Bloom... picked on Todd to score the music for the play,” former co-worker on *Drum* Casey Motsitsi writes in Matshikiza’s 1968 obituary, “Todd really worked himself to the bone.”<sup>66</sup>

### Conceptualizing *King Kong*

With authors embarking on the play’s book and score by late 1957, this USAA-backed “creative group” of Bloom, Matshikiza and the Menells comprised the conceptual team for this unique project.<sup>67</sup> With the exception of Matshikiza, these individuals were all Jewish South Africans and thus relied on their ties to Johannesburg’s sizeable pool of accomplished Jewish artists, actors and musicians to fill whatever needs they faced in

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<sup>64</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 206.

<sup>65</sup> Matshikiza once told *Drum* Editor-in-chief Tom Hopkinson that he used his own memory of “how he (Dlamini) looked” and simply “just went up to the piano and played his theme song—the music for him starts high and falls to a low note. That’s how I saw him. I just sat down and played it and I knew it was complete.” See Tom Hopkinson, “King Kong is Coming,” *The Observer Weekend Review* (London), January 29, 1961.

<sup>66</sup> Casey Motsisi, “Todd Matshikiza,” in Mthobeni Mutlootse, ed., *Casey & Co.: Selected Writings of Casey ‘Kid’ Motsisi* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1971), 92.

<sup>67</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11; and Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 94.

staging this production.<sup>68</sup> Unlike most South African whites (liberal or conservative), Johannesburg's Jewish population was disproportionately represented in the arts and within interracial interactions with African populations (both in the arts and in political activism). As Nkosi writes:

Johannesburg had also the sense to have a large Jewish population, which, besides making money, also did a great deal to temper this crude urban landscape with what surely must be the innate Jewish gift for marshalling residual energy toward a life of contemplative culture. If Johannesburg is a cultural desert (indeed the whole of South Africa is) it would have been a worse desert without the mitigating Jewish presence. For instance, if one was foolhardy enough to have girl friends across the colour-line they were likely to be Jewish (as guilt-ridden as hell, naturally, and fixated on their fathers to boot); if one had white friends of any sort they were most likely Jewish... and it was they who provided whatever fusion there was between African native talent and European discipline and technique. They and the Africans made Johannesburg alive and absorbent in a way no other city of the Republic was."<sup>69</sup>

It was this meshing of "African native talent" and "European discipline and technique" that *King Kong* represented but also sought to embody. Thus it seemed natural for Bernhardt, Bloom and the other organizers to rely on their Jewish associates when forming the directorial staff. Consequently, nearly every element of the white participation and organization of *King Kong* was Jewish, including the author, the set-designer, the director, lyricist, music director, choreographer and many of its stage hands.<sup>70</sup> ("I would like to say that the Jewish spirit has to some undefined extent entered into the production of *King Kong*", *King Kong* director Leon Gluckman would later claim.)<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> The record of Jewish political activists opposing the apartheid regime is too long to list, but did include such notable figures like Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Joe Slovo, Helen Suzman and Dennis Goldberg. For more on the impact of South African Jewry within artistic circles, see "South African Jews in the Theatre," Special Issue of *Jewish Affairs*, Volume 61, Number 4 (Chanukah 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 19.

<sup>70</sup> Slier, "King Kong and the Jewish Connection," 71.

<sup>71</sup> Slier, "King Kong and the Jewish Connection," 71.

Despite maintaining full-time employment and possessing familial responsibilities, the team, joined by painter/architect Arthur Goldreich (who designed the sets, costumes and later the album cover to the production's first LP) and journalist Patricia Williams (who composed much of the lyrics), began hammering out the project at the Menell home.<sup>72</sup> Together they pieced together the plot and story line, often with Goldreich acting out each part as ideas flowed.<sup>73</sup> At such meetings, the collective “visualize[d] (and act[ed] out) many of the separate scenes, characters, sequences and facets of the story they wished to produce, and the aspects of the black man's life they wished to portray.”<sup>74</sup> Between late 1957 and early 1958, the collective drew up a skeletal outline of what would be launched as *King Kong* in less than a year.

A major obstacle overcome by the *Kong* creative team was Bloom's erratic and infrequent involvement with the project. Though he is largely credited by history with authoring the play, he repeatedly left the project to attend to other matters, mainly his own career as a lawyer, and consequently spent “[s]ome months” in Cape Town during

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<sup>72</sup> Goldreich's experience with *King Kong* is particularly significant as much of his experience designing costumes would later be put to good use within his political life during the early-to-mid 1960s. He helped fix disguises, fake moustaches and wigs for leaders like Ahmed Kathrada, Nelson Mandela, and Govan Mbeki when the ANC went underground and decided to launch an armed struggle against the government. Such disguises can be seen in the various photographs from the Rivonia arrests in 1961 as Mbeki, for instance, is dressed as an African laborer. Furthermore, Goldreich along with political activist Harold Wolpe escaped from prison in 1963, which necessitated once creating disguises to distort their appearance, and they used their Dorkay House theatrical connections to hide at playwright Barney Simon's flat since the couple knew the house of any known political ally would be under surveillance.

<sup>73</sup> Writing on Goldreich's contributions, De Beer claims, “He would arrive on an imaginary bicycle, leap off and be the character who had been waiting for him, return to his bicycle and ride off again only to reappear as a bootlegger, shebeen queen or whatever was called for at the moment.” See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11.



the fleshing out of the play.<sup>75</sup> Due to his absence, much of the preliminary conceptualizations came from the core of Todd Matshikiza, Clive Menell, and Goldreich, who De Beer describes as “the catalyst through whom ideas and inspiration would flow at the story sessions in the studio.”<sup>76</sup> “It grew in those days, ja, just after Harry had left for Cape Town,” Matshikiza told De Beer about the conceptualization stage, “just by talking and feeling the story. We’d talk, piling up the ideas, discussing backwards and forwards and that’s how I wrote the music. Gee, it was great.”<sup>77</sup>

Thus rather than the effort of just one author, the play itself emerged as a project with many partial authors and contributors. “This was not written as most plays, I imagine, are written, by the author sitting at a desk,” Tom Hopkinson posited in a 1961 story about *Kong*’s creation, “It was talked into existence, first with the planners, then with the actors.”<sup>78</sup> After the group formalized many of these ideas into a rough sketch of a play (then entitled “Back o’ the Moon”), Bloom, who De Beer describes as “passing through Johannesburg,” returned for two days and filled out the play crafting into a more polished product and “40-page script delineating sequences, situations and character.”<sup>79</sup>

With Bloom gone once again, Matshikiza and Williams embarked on drafting the play and reworking the lyrics to Matshikiza’s already composed score. Matshikiza

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<sup>75</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11-2.

<sup>76</sup> Further contributions came from lyricist Williams and as rehearsals neared later input by director Gluckman, music director Stanley Glasser, and choreographer Arnold Dover. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11.

<sup>77</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 11-2.

<sup>78</sup> Tom Hopkinson, “King Kong is Coming,” *The Observer Weekend Review* (London), January 29, 1961.

<sup>79</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 12.

describes this experience as, “Harry left for Bloemfontein. The story wasn’t finished. Patricia [Williams] said, ‘I’ll try and finish it.’ Black man, and white woman caught up in the intrigue of a theatrical project.”<sup>80</sup> Together the two, according to De Beer, “wrote about four drafts of the play and completed many of the lyrics.”<sup>81</sup>

Beyond the effort of this duo, there may have been further input from some of Matshikiza’s peers within African jazz music. In *Chocolates For My Wife*, he claims that he and “ten groggy blacks” essentially put together much of the play before much of the script or storyline had been written down, while waiting for Williams’ husband (or flat mate) to arrive home. He remembers, “we were ticking nicely (buzzed from the liquor they had been drinking), ready to sing, dance, anything. We acted the King Kong story almos’ like it had been written already and wanted only the finishing touches.”<sup>82</sup>

With a rather meager sketch of the storyline, the conceptual team sought out a seasoned director to shape this potential all-African musical, the collective once again exploited their contacts within South African Jewish theatre and enlisted Leon Gluckman as director. Domestically, he had “been a name to know in South African Theatre” since 1948.<sup>83</sup> During his time with the Old Vic Company for its 1955 season in Britain and Australia, Gluckman worked with Katherine Hepburn and Robert Helpman.<sup>84</sup> After his

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<sup>80</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 121.

<sup>81</sup> Though De Beer claims only Williams participated in this achievement, it seems that Matshikiza and Williams collaborated on this stage. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 12; and Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 121.

<sup>82</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 122.

<sup>83</sup> P.S.L., “Harvest of Israel” in Henry Gluckman, *Life’s Rewards* (Johannesburg: Caxton, 1979), 283.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Gluckman, *Life’s Rewards*, 281; and P.S.L., “Harvest of Israel” in Gluckman’s *Life’s Rewards*, 283.

return to South Africa in 1957, Gluckman quickly surfaced as one of the most prominent and busy figures within South African theatre, as he participated in “eight plays in 11 months” either as director, producer or actor by mid-1958.<sup>85</sup> Amazingly, Gluckman agreed to direct *King Kong* while already being scheduled for “two enormous roles in Cape Town for Leonard Schach” just weeks after *King Kong*’s scheduled premier for “two enormous roles in Cape Town for Leonard Schach” (one of these productions, which included Gluckman, later debuted in Johannesburg “exactly a week after the opening” of *King Kong*).<sup>86</sup>

Despite his father serving as a cabinet member in the Smuts administration, Gluckman possessed no firm political allegiances and viewed theatre as a vehicle to reach across cultural divides. Though remarkably productive within local theatre throughout the 1950s, it appears that Gluckman agreed to direct *King Kong* because he was keenly aware of its potential ramifications within local theatre, but also within South African society. Though this production was his first involvement with African actors, he had already begun formulating the potential of productions that could reach both black and white audiences. “The audience potential is cut to ribbons [due to segregation legislation],” Gluckman told one interviewer in 1953. “If it were not so tragic, it would be ludicrous. It is difficult to exist spiritually in a country where the basic equality of all human beings is not recognised.”<sup>87</sup> Thus it seems that he was presumably enthralled by this opportunity to take South African theatre in an entirely new and groundbreaking direction. This

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<sup>85</sup> Zelda, “‘King Kong’ biggest S.A. musical ever,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), August 23, 1959.

<sup>86</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 128.

<sup>87</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 127.

desire to effect change within South African theatre appears also to be why he agreed to “handle this production on the most ridiculous terms.” Bernhardt later claimed, “Never before in the history of theatre has anyone done so much for so little.”<sup>88</sup>

After enlisting Gluckman as director, the group sought out additional friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who possessed any sort of professional or amateur experience that could be of use to a musical and aid in turning this project largely conceived by relative amateurs into a professional (or at least professional-looking) theatrical production. The two most significant were Stanley Glasser (who recently completed his graduate work in music at Cambridge and had literally just returned to South Africa) as music director, and ballet teacher Arnold Dover as choreographer and later stage manager.

Returning from studying music at King’s College (Cambridge, Britain), Glasser was scheduled to join the faculty at the University of Cape Town following the play<sup>89</sup> and also worked with renowned documenter of African music scholar Hugh Tracey at Tracey’s African music library in Msaho (located outside of Johannesburg) before leaving to study in Cambridge.<sup>90</sup> Thus he was equipped with a formal education in music

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<sup>88</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>89</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ has hit tunes, says music director,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 2, 1958.

<sup>90</sup> This library published the *African Music Society Journal*. During the late 1970s, it was later relocated to Rhodes University in Grahamstown where it is now known as the International Library of African Music. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 13-4; and Irene Vermaak, “International Library of African Music (ILAM),” International Library of African Music, August 20, 2008 <http://www.ru.ac.za/library/services/researchinstitutelibraries/ilam> (accessed on May 9, 2009).

and possessed orchestral experience in addition to a grasp of traditional African musical forms.<sup>91</sup>

A former professional ballet dancer in Britain, Dover remained in Johannesburg and set up school there.<sup>92</sup> Throughout his life in Johannesburg, he remained quite active, and before *King Kong*, he participated in, according to De Beer, “more than forty shows, apart from the choreography and direction of about twenty-five ballet seasons.”<sup>93</sup> One particular project that helped prepare him for *Kong* was his choreography of African performers in the local film *Sound of Africa*, which Todd Matshikiza describes in 1952 as “the most impressive musical of its kind ever made in Africa.”<sup>94</sup> Dover’s experience in the dance world also proved useful later, as he assembled the role as *King Kong*’s stage director once performances began.<sup>95</sup>

The three possessed an already affable working relationship as they had previously worked together in 1949 on *Xmas Box* (described by De Beer as “an intimate revue”).<sup>96</sup> Glasser also “wrote the incidental music” to Gluckman’s 1949 production of *Antony and Cleopatra*,<sup>97</sup> and Glasser and Gluckman were friends since childhood.<sup>98</sup> This

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<sup>91</sup> It remains unclear, however, how much experience he possessed with jazz music prior to his involvement in *King Kong*.

<sup>92</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 13.

<sup>93</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “Song of Africa,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1952.

<sup>95</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 14.

<sup>96</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ has hit tunes, says music director,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 2, 1958.

<sup>98</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 95; and Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 128.

friendship between the three would later be key, as throughout rehearsals they often “remain[ed] behind until the small hours, preparing for the following day’s work.”<sup>99</sup>

### **Casting and Staging *King Kong***

Before this jazz opera could proceed any further, the music needed orchestration. It was only until Glasser’s return to South Africa in September 1958 that much of this process occurred.<sup>100</sup> Upon his return, he was updated with the progress on the production, and partook in a *Township Jazz* concert where the “Jazz Dazzlers” featured as backing group.<sup>101</sup> Almost immediately afterwards, he began orchestrating Matshikiza’s music.

While it remains unclear whether formal rehearsals were held for the band or if someone close to African music (like Bernhardt or Matshikiza) selected the best African musicians with the most knowledge of reading or writing music, the early core of the orchestra formed early on and consisted of three accomplished instrumentalists: Kippie Moeketsi (clarinet and sax), Sol Klaaste (piano), and Mackay Davashe (saxophone).<sup>102</sup> Moeketsi, Davashe and Klaaste had been performing on and off again for years, as the three formed the core of the popular music group, the Jazz Dazzlers.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, Bernhardt and the USAA management would have by now isolated which musicians

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<sup>99</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 129.

<sup>100</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 15-6.

<sup>102</sup> De Beer does claim that Glasser met with Matshikiza almost immediately upon his return to Johannesburg, and that Matshikiza brought along Davashe to this meeting. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 14.

<sup>103</sup> Other members from the Jazz Dazzlers were later added to the *King Kong* orchestra.

could aid Glasser in transforming Matshikiza's vision into written orchestrations through their Union All-Star Band, which included Mackay Davashe and Kippie Moeketsi.<sup>104</sup> In addition to these three were two talented youngsters, Jonas Gwangwa (trombone) and Hugh Masekela (trumpet), of the Trevor Huddleston Jazz Band. Though they would later be joined by eight other performers for the play's actual orchestra, these five African musicians formed the core of the band. The group knew each other's abilities and strengths quite well, as they frequently played together both around the Rand and across South Africa. (Davashe, Moeketsi and Masekela, for instance, had recently performed with Matshikiza as they formed the background band for the Manhattan Brothers' tour of the Cape Province.)<sup>105</sup>

Makwenkwe "Mackay" Davashe was an experienced musician by 1959. After practicing with a pennywhistle throughout his youth, Davashe later toured with groups led by respectable musicians Ernest Mochumi, Wilfred Sentso (the Downbeats and the Syncofans) and "Zuluboy" Cele (Jazz Maniacs).<sup>106</sup> While facing mixed results leading his own bands, his arrangements were quite popular on the Reef, and *Drum* noted in 1952, "His renditions of African themes are the best we have had so far."<sup>107</sup> The magazine further added that "every orchestra on the Reef is keen to feature" Davashe's "Majuba."<sup>108</sup> Davashe's "Lakutshona Ilanga" was recorded by the Manhattan Brothers

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<sup>104</sup> Todd Matshikiza, "Shantytown in City Hall!" *Drum* (Johannesburg), August 1956.

<sup>105</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 94.

<sup>106</sup> The last two bandleaders were a couple of the major bandleaders of the 1940s. See "Naughty Boy—Slept Out Two Weeks!" *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1952.

<sup>107</sup> "Naughty Boy—Slept Out Two Weeks!" *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1952.

<sup>108</sup> "Naughty Boy—Slept Out Two Weeks!" *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1952.

with Makeba and became a significant hit in 1953, as it was turned into an English-lyric song called “Lovely Lies” that enjoyed significant success abroad.<sup>109</sup>

He was joined by Klaaste, a highly trained pianist, and Moeketsi, a self-taught saxophonist. An experienced pianist who regularly worked for recording studios, Salisbury “Sol” Klaaste had also been enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand for a bachelor’s degree in music.<sup>110</sup> With apparently little formal training but possessing a strong reputation, Moeketsi was hailed as a legendary, if not the pre-eminent, musician of his time.<sup>111</sup> When prominent American clarinetist Tony Scott visited South Africa in 1957, he played repeatedly with local non-white performers, including numerous future members of the *King Kong* band, at the behest of many government officials.<sup>112</sup> While praising the collective ability of these musicians, it was Kippie Moeketsi whom he singled out for praise, and he even told the press that he’d like to “take Kippy along” to America.<sup>113</sup> Known widely as the South African incarnation of legendary American saxophonist Charlie ‘The Bird’ Parker, he excelled in music but acted erratically and dealt with substance abuse and mental health issues, which ultimately retarded his career.<sup>114</sup> Regardless of these issues, his ability as a musician was undeniable.

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<sup>109</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 35.

<sup>110</sup> He did not receive his degree as of 1960 solely because he failed to pass Italian I. See “Re: Mr. Salisbury William Klaaste,” Letter from Mrs. V.C. Greathead, University of the Witwatersrand, to the Native Commissioner (Johannesburg), May 25, 1960 in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.

<sup>111</sup> Tony Scott, “Problem Child of Music,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), January 1958.

<sup>112</sup> “Scott, Red Ho\_\_\_\_,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), October 1957.

<sup>113</sup> “Scott, Red Ho\_\_\_\_,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), October 1957.

<sup>114</sup> “Kippy ‘Morolong’ Moeketsi, Sad Man of Jazz,” in Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People*, 171.



This process of orchestrating the musical's score was intense, with the group putting in twelve hours of work per day with "no days off" (though the group did consistently make time after work to embark on long drinking sessions) over the span of two months.<sup>115</sup> Together with Glasser, Davashe, Moeketsi and Klaaste wrote out the music while young Masekela and Gwangwa copied out "the orchestral parts from the sketches" out of Glasser's mother's home.<sup>116</sup> "We did all the music at Spike's home," Masekela informed Andersson, "and he treated us like kings. Mackay Davashe, Sol Klaaste, Kiepie Moeketsi, Gwigwi Mwreb[i] and Spike arranged all the music, from a tape of tunes which Todd gave us. We'd listen to it, and the others would sit around the piano while Spike wrote everything out, orchestrated."<sup>117</sup>

With the orchestration duties nearing completion, the next task to sort out was casting. In casting this musical, the USAA relied mainly on the stable of performers that it had amassed throughout the decade and those identified in its talent shows. Through a number of talent shows and the *Township Jazz* concerts, the union presumably had already identified much of the singing, dancing, and music-playing talent that it could use in this theatrical production.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, *Kong's* directing team identified and drew

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<sup>115</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 97-8.

<sup>116</sup> Masekela also described these as "our first music lesson" as he and Jonas Gwangwa learned so much about music during that experience. See Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 97; and Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>117</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>118</sup> Sophie Mgcina, an actress in *King Kong*, for instance, was discovered in an USAA-organized talent show. See "Sophie Mgcina," in Irene Stephanous and Leila Henriques, *The World in an Orange: Creating Theatre with Barney Simon* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 32.

talent from other performing troupes unaffiliated with the union, such as *African Jazz and Variety*, *Zonk* and *Drums of Africa*.<sup>119</sup>

The casting of actors and actresses involved in the musical emerged as a serious dilemma that needed to be overcome by Gluckman and the rest of *King Kong*'s management. There were few experienced and trained African actors in Johannesburg by the time of casting, as there were no schools where "drama was taught to our people."<sup>120</sup> "While some of us were professional performers," admits Mogotsi, "most of the cast were inexperienced and had never seen a play or been in a theatre before."<sup>121</sup> Due to apartheid policies of the time, Europeans could not perform on stage with Africans and thus no cast member or narrator could be European, which added further pressure to the production, as it could not rely on a formally trained white thespian to carry the storyline. Throughout casting, it appears that the production team struggled over who should play each character. Mogotsi remarks that Gluckman "struggled to find ways to cope" with this dilemma and "auditioned many people".<sup>122</sup> Casting the title role of "King Kong" proved particularly difficult, as the *Rand Daily Mail* claimed that the USAA struggled to "find a man who can radiate the legend, personality and mystery of 'King Kong'."<sup>123</sup>

By 1959, African theatre on the Witwatersrand was still in its utmost formative stages. Aside from the handful of theatrical productions by the USAA and other amateur

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<sup>119</sup> Many of the *King Kong* cast, such as Miriam Makeba, Dottie Tiyo, Thandie Klaasen, the Woodpeckers, the Manhattan Brothers, and "Satch" Masinga, performed with *African Jazz and Variety* at one stage in their careers. See Andersson, *Music in the mix*, 27.

<sup>120</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 62.

<sup>121</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 62.

<sup>122</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 62.

<sup>123</sup> "'King Kong' first African musical," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), June 27, 1958.

groups, there existed little effort to train Africans on how to act, and few previous productions to hone their acting skills and gauge which performers could become proper actors. Luckily for the USAA, the organization had just months earlier worked with up-and-coming playwright Athol Fugard on a production of *No Good Friday* (1958) and did identify a few under-trained but skilled African actors, such as Dan Poho, Stephen Moloi and Ken Gampu, to take part in *King Kong*.<sup>124</sup>

One potential source of actors and actresses came from six locally made films produced earlier in the decade. These projects featured sizeable African casts that *King Kong* could potentially draw from. Often offering variety show formats on celluloid, however, the films, such as *Jim Comes to Joburg* (1949), *Zonk* (1950),<sup>125</sup> *Magic Garden* (1951) and *Sound of Africa* (1951), provided little acting experience for the African casts, as they relied a great deal on song and musical performance rather than acting.<sup>126</sup> The locally-made, foreign-directed dramas of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (directed by Zoltán Korda and released worldwide in 1951) and *Come Back, Africa* (directed by Lionel Rogosin and filmed in 1958) only provided a select few of Africans with significant experience. A full-fledged Hollywood film, *Cry, the Beloved Country*'s cast featured imported black American, Caribbean and British actors/actresses, such as Edric Conner, Canada Lee and Sidney Poitier, for most of the speaking roles in the film, and only

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<sup>124</sup> Bloke Modisane also claims that *King Kong*'s directing team also approached him to take part in the production, but he could not due to his plans to leave the country. See Modisane, *Blame Me On History* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1963), 291; and Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (2008), 267.

<sup>125</sup> In addition to the film, the term, "Zonk," was used in the naming of stage shows and an African magazine. In an effort to differentiate the newspaper from these other productions, I have included an exclamation point, which appeared regularly on the magazine's cover.

<sup>126</sup> See Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

featured African thespians in extremely minor parts.<sup>127</sup> Though using a cast entirely comprised of local actors, *Come Back, Africa* stuck to a documentary-like approach to South Africa, and it featured its cast performing roles similar to their own lives. Rogosin, consequently, cast a singer (Makeba) to perform in “the shebeen scene” and cast a near-illiterate migrant laborer in its main role of a Zulu man who faces trouble in the apartheid metropolis of Johannesburg, and therefore it too did little to test the acting of its cast. With this point made, it does appear that the *King Kong* directorial team did value this experience and cast a few members of *Come Back, Africa*, such as Stephen Moloi, Miriam Makeba, Vinah Bendile and Hazel Futa, for its production.<sup>128</sup>

With only a handful of actors and actresses with even marginal acting experience, the Gluckman-led production looked to cast the top singing and dancing talent in the play’s lead roles. Knowing that such performers would be comfortable performing stage roles similar to their own routines, Gluckman, Bloom et al. tailored the play to suit the cast’s strengths, and they collectively decided to present much of the play in an “extra-musically” manner meaning that much of the storyline would be told in song.<sup>129</sup> The main character of “King Kong,” a role that needed to be filled by an accomplished singer rather than an actor with little singing ability or stage presence, possessed relatively few

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<sup>127</sup> The notable exception was Lionel Ngakane, who chose to pursue acting as his main profession after his involvement with *Cry, the Beloved Country*, but he had immigrated to Britain years earlier. This film did have, however, some *King Kong* connection, as Peggy Phango, who went on to play “Joyce” for the 1961 London run of *King Kong*, appeared as a nurse and it appears that Todd Matshikiza’s wife, Esmé, auditioned to be the girlfriend of “Absolom Kumalo,” who was played by Ngakane. See Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 54; and Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 28.

<sup>128</sup> This may also be due to Rogosin’s or his South African friends’ (such as Monty and Myrtle Berman) involvement with the USAA and the white liberal circles within Johannesburg. See Lionel Rogosin, *Come Back, Africa: A Man Possessed* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 98-99.

<sup>129</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 17.

speaking parts, in total “barely 200 words” throughout the entire production,<sup>130</sup> and therefore, as De Beer notes, his “expression is through his fists, his story is related by the washerwomen, his problems are handled by his manager.”<sup>131</sup> This decision allowed the USAA-backed production to draw from the strengths of the union’s membership, and local singers would be asked to act rather than the other way around. “The singers spoke little... the limitations imposed by the inexperience of all but a handful of the future cast, recruited from all walks of life,” states De Beer, “led to an emphasis not so much on the development of a continuous dramatic line, but on the use of a thin line which would reach a number of theatrical ‘moments’ which Leon knew would work.”<sup>132</sup>

In areas where song could not carry the plot, the production called for a few key narrators and actors, who would tend to be those with previous acting experience, to tell the actual story. “They fell back on the simplest stage convention of all, the reminiscences of a ‘narrator’,” De Beer explains, “in this instance three washerwomen and an old man, Dan Kuswayo.”<sup>133</sup> It was in such roles that Gluckman and the USAA relied on three actors, Moloi, Poho and Gampu, who had all taken part in Fugard’s *No-Good Friday*.<sup>134</sup>

In casting the lead male actors, Gluckman turned to the Manhattan Brothers singing quartet. By the beginning of the 1950s, the Manhattan Brothers were already well-known (causing *The African Drum* to state, “Probably you have seen and heard the

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<sup>130</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 34.

<sup>131</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 34.

<sup>132</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 17.

<sup>133</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 17.

<sup>134</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 29-30.

Manhattan Brothers on the stage”) and on their way to getting “nearer to being great popular music singers.”<sup>135</sup> They had been performing together for over twenty years,<sup>136</sup> and their “Lovely Lies” reportedly cracked on the American Billboard Top 100 in March 1956.<sup>137</sup> At their peak, Matshikiza claimed in one *Drum* feature on the group’s career that they possessed “thousands of fans” across Southern Africa and could “average £250 per week quite easily when business is good.”<sup>138</sup> By the time of casting for the musical, the Brothers had hit hard times, and their reputation as the dominant singing group in South Africa was anything but assured. Perhaps sensing their strong potential as actors, the group’s experience performing with one another or their physical attributes (Matshikiza once described Mdledle as a man “whose height, among other gifts, distinguishes him from other men”), Gluckman assigned the two male leads of “Kong” and the gangster “Lucky” (Kong’s main rival) to Brothers’ lead singers, Mdledle and Mogotsi, respectively.<sup>139</sup> Joining Lucky’s “Prowler’s Gang” were the two remaining Manhattan Brothers, Rufus Khoza and Ronnie Majola.

Joining the Manhattan Brothers in other key roles were the Woody Woodpeckers, another popular singing group on the Rand. By 1959, they arguably had surpassed the

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<sup>135</sup> For more on the group, see Don Barrigo, “Record Review,” *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1951; Todd Matshikiza, “Four Men and a Gal,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1953; Todd Matshikiza, “Dam-Dam,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1953; Bloke Modisane, “Manhattan Brothers Mellow,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), January 1956, 37-9; Mogotsi, *Mantindane*; and “Remember Joe Mogotsi?” *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), April 25, 1997, online archive (accessed on November 22, 2006).

<sup>136</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “Four Men-And A Girl!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1953.

<sup>137</sup> “Remember Joe Mogotsi?” *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), April 25, 1997, online archive (accessed on November 22, 2006).

<sup>138</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “Dam-Dam!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1953.

<sup>139</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “Four Men-And A Girl!” *Drum* (Johannesburg), July 1953.

Manhattan Brothers. As showbiz veterans of Herbert's *African Jazz and Variety*, they represented a new era of African singers, and many now considered them "the new darlings of township audiences."<sup>140</sup>

In considering whom to cast as the female lead of "Joyce," one would likely presume that the production enjoyed many choices for this part because of the sizeable number of African female vocalists throughout the 1950s. Singer Dorothy Masuku and singer/actress Dolly Rathebe presumably would have been the top contenders for this role, but times were changing for African women in show business by 1959. Whereas a few years earlier Masuku or Rathebe was the preeminent female star of both the local Johannesburg music industry and touring variety acts, the concluding years of the 1950s marked a sort of changing of the guard regarding female performers. Additionally, pregnancies, extended trips away from Johannesburg, and (in the case of Rathebe) retirement undermined their standing within performance circles on the Rand.<sup>141</sup>

By the time of *King Kong*'s staging, Makeba was one of, if not the, most popular female singer in South Africa. She initially latched on as the female singer for the marginally popular Cuban Brothers, and soon thereafter she was approached by Nathan Mdledle to join the Manhattan Brothers, who were looking for a replacement for their

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<sup>140</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 94.

<sup>141</sup> As a result of her hiatus from show business and subsequent relocation to Port Elizabeth during the mid-1950s, Rathebe missed out on the first "Township Jazz" shows. Though she would rejoin the USAA's later concerts, her lack of involvement in these first "Township Jazz" performances possibly caused her to fall out of favor with the USAA (compared to those who were involved in the grassroots movement from the very beginning). Additionally, De Beer cites her pregnancy as a key reason why she was not considered for the part of "Joyce." See Can Themba, "Dolly," *Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1957.

regular female singer Emily Kwenane.<sup>142</sup> At this point in time, the Manhattans were the preeminent male group in South Africa, and Makeba's joining them immediately transformed her into a significant showbiz personality as she remarks, "The Manhattan Brothers drove me to fame."<sup>143</sup> After securing a career with the Manhattans, a Gallotone talent agent approached her to headline an all-girl quartet called the Skylarks, which featured future *King Kong* cast mates Mary Rabotapi, Mummy Girl Nketle, and Abigail Khubeka in addition to Makeba.<sup>144</sup> She also led a three-girl group called the Sunbeams that recorded with Trutone Records, Gallo's archrival.<sup>145</sup> With her already strong relationship with the Manhattan Brothers and marginal acting experience in two films,<sup>146</sup> she apparently became the ideal candidate for the lead female role in *King Kong*, which is further demonstrated by her claim that she did not need to fully audition for the role.<sup>147</sup>

Accordingly, the rest of the cast was comprised of various performers and groups prominent within African performing circles around Johannesburg. These performers included Benjamin "Gwigwi" Mrwebi, Khubeka, Dottie Tiyo, Ruth Nkonyeni, Phyllis Mqomo, Desirée Mkele, Letta Mbulu, Linda Mhlongo, Benjamin "Satch" Masinga, the

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<sup>142</sup> It remains unclear why Kwenane was replaced. See Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 26.

<sup>143</sup> Interestingly it appears that her performances with the Manhattan Brothers and her subsequent reviews from them that she became known as Miriam rather than Zenzile and received the nickname "Nightengale." See Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 28 and 35.

<sup>144</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 39-41.

<sup>145</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 39-41.

<sup>146</sup> In her autobiography, Makeba mentions being involved in a film called *The 37<sup>th</sup> Bride* in addition to *Come Back, Africa*. All of my efforts to find out more information about this film have proven fruitless and thus I could not include in my earlier analysis on local cinema.

<sup>147</sup> While she claims, "I did not audition" for the role, it seems that she did go through a minimal audition as she elaborates, "They (the *Kong* organizers) called me to read the script and to do some of the songs." See Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 44.



Chord Sisters, the Katzenjammer Kids (including a young Caiphus Semenya), Sophie Mgcina, the Swanky Spots, and a slew of other performers. In the end, the casting blended together the established singing groups, such as the Manhattan Brothers, Makeba and the Woody Woodpeckers, with the upcoming generation of black performers, such as Mbulu, Semenya, Mgcina and Khubeka. Together it featured South Africa's past, present, and future heavyweights of theatre, song and dance.

### **Rehearsing Africa under White Supervision**

With little of the music, choreography or scenes fully completed, rehearsal began in November 1958 in “a derelict factory” blocks away from Dorkay House nicknamed “The Dungeon” by the production’s guitarist, General Duze.<sup>148</sup> Throughout a period of over six weeks, the cast and band trickled into “The Dungeon” after working their “everyday” jobs for rehearsals, which lasted between 5:30 until 11:00 pm.<sup>149</sup> After the cast left for their homes, Gluckman, Glasser and Dover continued working until the early morning and at some points, according to Gluckman, “were literally working night and day.”<sup>150</sup> This schedule became so demanding that many of the significant others of those involved in the production became affectionately deemed “the *King Kong* widows”.<sup>151</sup>

The task ahead for the cast, band and directors was immense, as *King Kong* aimed to present first-class, professional musical theatre using a cast with little-to-no acting

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<sup>148</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

<sup>149</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63; and De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 32-5.

<sup>150</sup> Tom Hopkinson, “King Kong is Coming,” *The Observer Weekend Review* (London), January 29, 1961.

<sup>151</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 37.

experience and a production team, with the exception of Gluckman, that possessed no experience taking part in a production of this size and magnitude. Beyond these obstacles, the entire concept of whites and blacks working together in spite of apartheid meant that expectations by the public would be further heightened, and any flaws could potentially be cited by those sympathetic to apartheid as a justification for the state's racist policies. "Three months was a dangerously short time in which to perfect a show of this scale, especially with artists who, however talented, were untrained and inexperienced... Leon often remarked to me afterwards that the inadequate amount of time at his disposal had been a blessing in disguise," writes Tucker, "since the heavy pressure allowed him no time to realise that he was attempting the impossible."<sup>152</sup>

As opposed to previous attempts at African theatre that dwelt on European stories like Shakespearean plays, *King Kong* was based around Dlamini's life story and, in general, life for Africans residing in Johannesburg's townships. This point eased the cast's transition from singers and dancers to actors each playing a specific role. De Beer comments:

The cast were not acting as people of the township; they were of the township. They had encountered the gangsters and police of real life; they had been in shebeens and joked about their misfortunes; they were expressing the known frustrations and the known saving factors in the life of the South African black man—optimism, music, and an ability to laugh.<sup>153</sup>

Echoing her points but providing a point of view from an African member of the cast, Mogotsi recalls:

Although our play had its limitations by professional standards, it had one exciting ingredient that breathed life into it: the actors were not so much acting as living out their everyday

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<sup>152</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 129.

<sup>153</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 33.

lives on stage. *King Kong* was ours. We had known him in the townships. We had all seen gangsters, so we knew how to inject the gloating viciousness with which they terrorised the townships. Many of us had to do manual labour at some time in our lives so the scene featuring a road gang at work benefited from personal experience. And, of course, illegal shebeens were part of our everyday life.<sup>154</sup>

Thus it appears that the topic of *King Kong* and urban African life on the Rand in a highly musical setting proved to be the near-ideal choice to best capitalize on the cast's professional strengths, while also underplaying their collective weaknesses.

Although this blending of reality and acting aided in the cast's preparation, it also brought on an entirely different (and often humorous) set of issues. One scene of "King Kong" in-training needed a strong, muscular man to bring realism to the scene. The production, as a result, brought in a competitive weightlifter, Peter Radebe, to fill this part. Perhaps receiving more realism than they anticipated, Radebe refused to use cardboard weights and insisted on using "real weights" in order to "keep me fit for the week-ends."<sup>155</sup>

Beyond being taught how to best act out roles and how to move within a disciplined theatrical format, the cast was also provided with voice training, presumably to aid the actors in dictation and suppress their accents in order for white audiences to fully follow the storyline.<sup>156</sup>

While inside The Dungeon, the cast and production team mixed freely and worked together on bringing the production to life. Here, in a rare occurrence in apartheid South Africa, blacks and whites worked together on a level of mutual respect

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<sup>154</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

<sup>155</sup> "Pocket Hercules," *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 7, 1959; and De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 47-8.

<sup>156</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

and tolerance. Recalling Gluckman's approach to directing the African cast, Mogotsi states, "He wanted to create something successful for us all, black and white. He would talk through ideas with us and did not dominate the artists. As a result, most of us worked harmoniously with him. He will long be remembered by the cast for his tolerance, concern, optimism and belief that we would succeed."<sup>157</sup> As a unit, the band and Glasser became so close that they, according to De Beer, became "a hitherto unknown tribe called the 'Yugudus'" and "literally [crafted] a language of its own."<sup>158</sup>

Despite the apparent escape from apartheid policy inside "The Dungeon," outside of the factory, however, the reality of apartheid pervaded. At the first rehearsal, Gluckman outlined "five main points which we shall have to overcome if the production is to be a success". These points were "Distance (difficulties of transport and punctuality at rehearsals)," "Tradition (acting is alien to most of you)," "Discipline (subjecting oneself for the good of all)," "Illness," and "The Law."<sup>159</sup> With the experiences gleaned from USAA's previous endeavors, Dover's involvement in *Song of Africa*, and the play's own orchestration, the organizational team sought to work around such issues.<sup>160</sup>

In hopes of avoiding many of these issues, the USAA arranged for a bus to take the cast home to "Orlando, Meadowlands, Sophiatown and Western Native Township nightly, dropping off performers on the way."<sup>161</sup> This costly service reportedly ran "into

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<sup>157</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 62.

<sup>158</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 45-6.

<sup>159</sup> De Beer, *King Kong A Venture in the Theatre*, 32-3.

<sup>160</sup> "'Song of Africa,' Scenes From African Film," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), September 1951.

<sup>161</sup> "'King Kong' a nightmare of organization," *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 16, 1958; De Beer, 35; and Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 124-5.

the hundreds [of pounds] by the time the musical finishe[d],” but it was necessary in order to transport the seventy-plus cast and orchestra from downtown Johannesburg, deemed by the state as a whites-only area past curfew, and thus avoid passbook violations and arrests by the police and attacks from Johannesburg’s criminal gangs.<sup>162</sup>

Though the city’s criminal element certainly hindered the production (some musicians were robbed of their instruments while returning from rehearsals),<sup>163</sup> pass offenses were more detrimental and became semi-regular occurrences.<sup>164</sup> On one occasion drummer Norman Martin and Mogotsi were picked up for not possessing passes, and were actually sent to work on a prison farm in Randfontein until the production team contacted the police after realizing that the two had not turned up for rehearsal.<sup>165</sup> Such occurrences took place with such frequency that De Beer claims that [e]ach member of the cast and backstage staff was later issued with a special ‘King Kong Pass.’”<sup>166</sup>

In spite of such difficulties, the rehearsals proved successful and the production morphed over time into a polished, professional-looking musical. “The polished acting, graceful movements, accomplished singing and the vibrant playing by the band added up to the most exciting afternoon in our experience,” notes De Beer, “and when the final

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<sup>162</sup> “‘King Kong’ a nightmare of organization,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 16, 1958.

<sup>163</sup> Tom Hopkinson, “King Kong is Coming,” *The Observer Weekend Review* (London), January 29, 1961.

<sup>164</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

<sup>165</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

<sup>166</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 39.

penny-whistle tune faded out there was a hushed silence before wild applause broke out.”<sup>167</sup>

### **Funding an “All-African” Musical**

Although initial efforts to secure funding from “all the big music people in Johannesburg” failed, and the “Bacchus Event” was “only partly successful from a financial point of view,”<sup>168</sup> *King Kong* surfaced as “the most expensively mounted local production ever undertaken” by its staging with the USAA investing roughly £7,000 into the production, possibly loaned from a rich patron.<sup>169</sup> Though “a shoestring budget for a production of this size”, according to Tucker (who possesses a thorough knowledge of theatrical costs), this amount was “astronomical at the time”.<sup>170</sup> In addition to the union, the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund (AMSTF) fronted some of the early production costs.<sup>171</sup> Hardly swimming in discretionary funds, the play’s organizers enlisted the support of many affluent individuals, particularly Robert Loder (who worked for Anglo-American Corporation), stockbroker Edward Joseph, Ruth Hellman, and

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<sup>167</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 40.

<sup>168</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 122; and De Beer, 19.

<sup>169</sup> These funds may have come from interest-free loans to the USAA rather than the USAA itself fronting these costs. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 50; and Andersson, *Music in the mix*, 34.

<sup>170</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 129.

<sup>171</sup> The African Medical Scholarship Fund was established to fund the schooling of African doctors after the government in 1949 withdrew previous funding for such individuals. Its use of *King Kong* as a fundraiser is not as surprising as one would initially suspect as the group received money from a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* put on by Wits’ University Players in 1950. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 12; and Bruce K. Murray, *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years: A History of the University of the Witwatersrand, 1939-1959* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), 131 and 341.

business executive John Rudd.<sup>172</sup> The production then exploited the group's business ties and personal connections of such individuals to solicit further donations and purchasing of advertisement space in the *King Kong* program.<sup>173</sup> Beyond monetary donations, a slew of companies donated various items ranging from bicycles to musical instruments to items of clothing.

These sponsors, donors and advertisers spanned South Africa's corporate landscape. Major sponsorships came from the Central News Agency, Coca-Cola, President Giant Cigarettes, and the Anglo-American Corporation of S.A. Ltd., all of which totaled nearly £4,000-5,000.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, "ten private individuals" made "considerable" donations. While not donating money directly to the production itself, periodicals geared towards African audiences, such as *Golden City Post*, *The World* and *Ilanga Lase Natal*, advertised the musical free of charge.<sup>175</sup> The interest of South African business leaders in this all-African jazz opera further demonstrates the widely perceived importance of this musical to black South African culture.

A major chunk of the play's cost was the wages of the African cast, band and stagehands. The USAA also incurred additional costs as it sought to pay their cast and orchestra members a wage beyond the wages typical for musicians and singers during the era. Performers in *King Kong* reportedly received salaries "round about £30 a week," a

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<sup>172</sup> This possibly came through Matshikiza's own connections. See Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>173</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 49.

<sup>174</sup> She could be seen on Coca Cola billboards as far as the Belgian Congo. See Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 32; and "Big Business Has Underwritten The £5,000 All-African Operetta 'King Kong'," *Business News* (Johannesburg), January 1959.

<sup>175</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 50-1.

significant amount.<sup>176</sup> In addition to being paid for performances, these salaries were paid “through the whole of the rehearsal period” and provided economic stability to many involved.<sup>177</sup> Though some African members of the cast or orchestra complained about pay in London and after their participation with the production, this pay does appear to have been significantly higher than what most employers of musicians would give at the time. Matshikiza claims that early fundraising efforts to recording companies often elicited the response, “you’re spoiling these boys, they’re used to playing for five bob a night.”<sup>178</sup>

Possessing grandiose visions of *King Kong*, the USAA booked the University of Witwatersrand’s Great Hall site prior to even holding auditions.<sup>179</sup> De Beer describes this act of booking the hall as “the biggest risk,” because the USAA could not be certain that the *King Kong* audiences would fill the sizeable auditorium (it seated 1052 patrons).<sup>180</sup> The site, on the other hand, was the only available place centrally located that allowed multiracial audiences due to its location on a university campus.<sup>181</sup> This need to stage this musical in front of multiracial audiences was a pressing concern for the USAA and the play’s organizers.

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<sup>176</sup> “‘King Kong’ is so boring — for people in the show!”, *The World* (Johannesburg), April 4, 1959; and Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>177</sup> “King Kong,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 12, 1958.

<sup>178</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates*, 122.

<sup>179</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 128.

<sup>180</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 12; and Slier, “*King Kong* and the Jewish Connection,” 70.

<sup>181</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 128.



At the time, “open” universities were in a period of flux. With pressure from the government to step in line with their policies, they struggled to function within the current framework. Despite protests from the student body, it appears that the University of the Witwatersrand itself toiled over how to proceed within this era of apartheid.<sup>182</sup> Perhaps fearing further pressure from the government or potential floods of black crowds on campus, this “open” university initially denied the USAA’s application to use the Great Hall, but eventually conceded, as historian Bruce Murray documents in *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years*, after the play’s powerful backers within industry and commerce, such as Anglo-American and DeBeers, swayed school officials to allow the musical to be staged on its campus.<sup>183</sup> Despite allowing the use of the hall for the *King Kong* production, the university’s council forced the USAA to segregate seating by rows.<sup>184</sup>

### **Reaction to *King Kong* by the Press and Public**

Due to various forms of preliminary hype, in addition to hundreds of people “now... drawn into the orbit of the *King Kong* production,” public interest and support for the production swept across Johannesburg long before its 1959 premiere.<sup>185</sup> As early as August 1958, *The Star* predicted that the musical “will be the biggest project of its

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<sup>182</sup> Almost simultaneous to *King Kong*’s premiere, it surfaced that a “blonde [female student] spy” had been providing information about student activism at Wits to the Special Branch. See Murray, *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years*, 311-9.

<sup>183</sup> Despite being an “open” university, Murray notes that only 74 members of the student body were African as of 1959. See Murray, *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years*, 324.

<sup>184</sup> Murray, *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years*, 319.

<sup>185</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 49.

kind, White or Black, ever tackled in South Africa,”<sup>186</sup> while Gluckman boldly forecasted that it “will probably be for all of us the biggest thing in our lives.”<sup>187</sup> As its February 1959 debut crept closer, excitement around it only grew, and newspaper critics lined up to pronounce *King Kong* a smash hit with one writer even proclaiming, “I’LL BET MY TYPEWRITER ON IT.”<sup>188</sup>

The play’s opening on February 2, 1959, accordingly, surfaced as “a gala occasion” and “was packed with an audience of all races.”<sup>189</sup> This audience included the likes of Johannesburg’s Mayor and Deputy-Mayor, Anglo-American chairman Harry Oppenheimer and his wife, 1958 Miss World Penny Coelen, and Nelson and Winnie Mandela.<sup>190</sup> “Mining magnates and their families and friends were there, the leading lights of the theatre, artistic and musical worlds had come to see what this much-publicized show was about,” De Beer writes of the diversity with the First Night audience, “all shades of political opinion were represented. Some had merely come along out of curiosity, others were veteran first-nights to be seen at any opening, others were genuine in their support of a ‘good cause.’”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Zelda, “‘King Kong’ biggest S.A. musical ever,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), August 23, 1958.

<sup>187</sup> Zelda, “‘King Kong’ biggest S.A. musical ever,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), August 23, 1958.

<sup>188</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “King Kong Comes to Life,” *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), January 18, 1959.

<sup>189</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

<sup>190</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview, in Mac Maharaj and Ahmed Kathrada, eds., *Mandela: the Authorised Portrait* (Highlands North: Wild Dog Press, 2006), 84; De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 51; Untitled photograph caption, *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 4, 1959; and “Foto’s Vertel Die Sosiale Nuus,” *Die Vaderland* (Johannesburg), February 4, 1959.

<sup>191</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 51.

Reaction to the production was overwhelmingly positive with the entire company receiving “a massive standing ovation” and taking “curtain call after curtain call.”<sup>192</sup> To many in the audience, the musical exceeded all prior hype and expectations. In recollecting his personal memories of the premiere, Tucker comments:

To describe the evening as a sensation is totally inadequate. Music, sets, lights, costumes and performances – all were of the highest order. The stage of Great Hall exploded into life. Arthur Goldreich’s designs, simple, linear and brightly coloured, immediately captured the atmosphere of the township. The energy of the cast was electric, the music alternately seductive, exhilarating and haunting. The final curtain fell to an ovation rarely heard at a Johannesburg first night for a locally produced show, and I lost count of the curtain calls. The roars grew louder as Leon Gluckman finally appeared on the stage. Obviously exhausted, he stood for a moment then, turning his back to the audience, bowed low to his sixty-three actors. It was one of the great and memorable nights in the history of the South African theatre, and all those who had made it possible were rewarded with a monumental hit.<sup>193</sup>

Others less close to the production expressed a similar sentiment. “All I know is that by the end of the evening every one of us in the audience could have leapt up and danced and sung with the cast,” wrote a gossip columnist for *The Star*, “such was the magic of the evening.”<sup>194</sup> This statement is more profound when one considers that such an act was highly illegal under apartheid laws by 1959.<sup>195</sup>

Outside the Great Hall, the opening night’s celebration continued. Describing the atmosphere outside after the performance, Esmé Matshikiza, Todd’s wife, said, “as we were going out, the cars were jammed outside the Great Hall and everybody was hooting! They were so excited.”<sup>196</sup> Though seemingly contradicting Matshikiza’s claims about the

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<sup>192</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63; and De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 52.

<sup>193</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 130.

<sup>194</sup> “I was a guest of honour,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 6, 1959.

<sup>195</sup> “King Kong!—You’ve Never Seen Anything So Real On The S.A. Stage Before,” *Sunday Express* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>196</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview, in Maharaj and Kathrada, eds., *Mandela: the Authorised Portrait*, 84.

“hooting,” one *Star* writer noted a similar scene of joyousness and celebration outside of the venue following the premiere:

It was difficult to get the audience of over a thousand strong to disperse when the musical was over, firstly because they gathered in excited knots in the foyer and on the steps to discuss the production and secondly, because the traffic control arrangements got a bit out of hand and two opposing lines of cars met in a solid jam outside the Great Hall. Such was the good humour and tolerance generated by the whole evening, however, that there was not a single impatient hoot.

Not a single bumper was scraped. We just sat meekly in our cars and smiled at the people in the adjoining cars – something of a record for Johannesburg.<sup>197</sup>

Thus it seems that this interracial production and finely received musical reintroduced civility and patience to a Johannesburg public that generally lacked both. This sort of success, and the packed houses that followed, greeted *King Kong* throughout its entire run at the Great Hall.

To many critics, *King Kong* was undeniably good. One *Star* reviewer went as far as to declare the musical as his “greatest thrill in 20 years of theatre-going in South Africa.”<sup>198</sup> *Drum* described it as “a SMASH HIT” and a month later, one of its writers, Bloke Modisane, claimed, “[*King Kong*] is the wonderful fulfillment of a great expectation. Not just because it is a brave experiment or the ‘first’. Nor does its being pure South African necessarily endow it with a ‘home product’ halo. No excuses, partisan or otherwise, are needed to pass it off as good.”<sup>199</sup> *The Rand Daily Mail*

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<sup>197</sup> “I was a guest of honour,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 6, 1959.

<sup>198</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ is greatest thrill in 20 years of S.A. theatre-going,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 3, 1959.

<sup>199</sup> Bloke Modisane, *Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1959.

proclaimed, “Here’s the Township Spirit!”<sup>200</sup> The musical’s LP endured similar praise with one reviewer claiming, “This—for my money—is the record of the year.”<sup>201</sup>

Even the conservative Afrikaans-press, which regularly espoused views sympathetic to the apartheid state and its policies towards the nation’s black majority, shockingly offered widely positive reviews. The *Weekblad* proclaimed, “King Kong Reaches Great Triumph,”<sup>202</sup> while *Die Vaderland* observed, “Impressive use was made of the contrasts inherent in the story to reveal the tremendous emotional depth of the life-struggle of the Native. In addition, this was one of the best mounted and rounded-off productions (imported or local) seen on the Johannesburg stage for a long time.”<sup>203</sup> “We should send an offering like this to the Paris Drama Festival or to the Edinburgh Festival,” added *Dagbreek* (described by the *Pretoria News* as “a mouthpiece of Dr. Verwoerd”), “because this is a rare opportunity to present to the outside world an accurate view of South African Bantu culture.” The paper took their review one step further by suggesting that the state should “support” the efforts of projects like *King Kong* to tour in order to present a positive face to the nation’s image abroad.<sup>204</sup>

Like the press, the general public’s reaction to *Kong* was nothing short of astonishing. More so than any other musical or theatrical production in the history of South Africa, *King Kong* broke into the national mainstream by drawing its audience from disparate groups from various political leanings, races, classes, educational levels

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<sup>200</sup> “Here’s the Township Spirit!” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 3, 1959.

<sup>201</sup> “Kong has a Hit Parade look,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 7, 1959.

<sup>202</sup> “King Kong Behaal Groot Triomf,” *Weekblad* (Johannesburg), February 13, 1959.

<sup>203</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 54.

<sup>204</sup> “‘King Kong’ May Come to Cape Town,” *Cape Times* (Cape Town), February 12, 1959.

and identities. One *Pretoria News* reader described the production as “something vitally African, produced and pointed by European talent to an art-form that makes an immediate appeal to every section of the population.”<sup>205</sup> Similarly, *Zonk!* declared the production “a show for everybody.”<sup>206</sup>

By reaching and appeasing “everybody,” the play’s scope remarkably spanned across Johannesburg society. Reflecting back on the play’s impact in 1999, John Matshikiza wrote of the 1959 reception to *King Kong* that it “immediately became the talk of the town in its home city, Johannesburg. It became a ‘must see’ for all levels of society. Black gangsters, white mining magnates, the exalted and the lowly, all packed in and gaped at this astonishing spectacle.”<sup>207</sup> One activist wrote twenty-five years after *Kong*’s debut, “It was not only white liberals who filled the halls and bought the LP... [T]he most popular record in any shebeen was *King Kong*... [P]rogressive (which did not of necessity mean liberal) whites regarded it as a step towards our dynamic culture of the future.”<sup>208</sup> Due to these types of reactions, Nkosi claims that *King Kong*, at the time, seemingly signified Johannesburg being “on the verge of creating a new and exciting Bohemia.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> E.A.C., “Outstanding Productions,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 16, 1959.

<sup>206</sup> “‘Sold Out’ Notice at Ticket Office-Show will go on Tour,” *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), March 1959.

<sup>207</sup> John Matshikiza, “An incomplete masterpiece waiting in the wings,” *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), February 5-11, 1999.

<sup>208</sup> Marius Schoon, review of *Music in the Mix: the story of South African popular music* by Muff Andersson, *Medu Art Ensemble Newsletter* Volume 4, Number 1 (1982): 44.

<sup>209</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 24.

Though the play appeared over a decade after apartheid's enactment, it received public support and adulation regularly within black and white media outlets. Though possessing flaws in its storytelling and the cast's amateurish acting, most audiences and critics willingly overlooked such flaws. Instead, they focused on and celebrated the historic and groundbreaking nature of *King Kong*. John Matshikiza writes, "The 1959 audience didn't notice this slight problem. They were mesmerized by the unexpected spectacle before them, and stamped their approval night after night."<sup>210</sup> Instead of being overly critical of this inter-racial endeavor that railed against apartheid's main tenets, some patrons and journalists believed that audiences and press were being too nice to the musical and "excessive."<sup>211</sup>

Many critics and audience members, from across racial lines, theorized that *King Kong* signified a new era in South African theatre, with the *Sunday Tribune* proclaiming, for example, "And the curtain goes up on South African theatrical history."<sup>212</sup> In order to convey the power of this play, a *Star* critic noted that all of Gluckman's previous work within South African theatre "pales beside this effort."<sup>213</sup> A black paper, *Golden City Post*, described the play as "the baby whom we now expect to grow stronger and bigger."<sup>214</sup> Many believed that these inter-racial efforts represented the future of South

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<sup>210</sup> John Matshikiza, "An incomplete masterpiece waiting in the wings," *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), February 5-11, 1999.

<sup>211</sup> "Their Metier," *Business News* (Johannesburg), February 1959.

<sup>212</sup> Molly Reinhardt, "Why can't Durban see this 'miracle' opera?", *Sunday Tribune* (Durban), February 8, 1959.

<sup>213</sup> Oliver Walker, "'King Kong' is greatest thrill in 20 years of S.A. theatre-going," *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 3, 1959.

<sup>214</sup> Joe Louw, "King Kong IS GREAT!", *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

African theatre and culture, and the *Sunday Times* professed, “theatre in South Africa has taken an enormous leap. We see here the fruits of a collaboration between an instinctive African genius for theatre and European discipline.”<sup>215</sup>

Beyond embarking on a new dawn in theatre history, it also ostensibly promoted a newfound respect for other races. Whereas most of the *King Kong* cast and band had “long been famed stars” to black audiences, they remained virtual unknowns to the nation’s white communities prior to *Kong*’s debut.<sup>216</sup> Through seeing *Kong*, white audiences too were now privy to the talent, skill, and “abounding vitality” of the nation’s African population “from the other side of the tracks.”<sup>217</sup> Aghast by what he had witnessed during a rehearsal, one critic asked, “Where did they learn all these tricks of stage business—this promptness on cue, this power of projection?”<sup>218</sup>

Before the play’s staging, black art and culture were largely unrecognized, ignored or belittled by white South African society. Now a musical based around the music of an African composer and featuring an African cast was being favorably compared to Gershwin in white newspapers and possibly “may in time draw the same respect.”<sup>219</sup> Now suddenly with *King Kong*, African music was being widely praised and deemed world-class by both white audiences and critics. Following performances, white

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<sup>215</sup> “It’s King-Size!”, *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>216</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr Drum?*, 188.

<sup>217</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ is greatest thrill in 20 years of S.A. theatre-going,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 3, 1959.

<sup>218</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King-Kong’ rehearsal is full of vigour and melody,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), January 20, 1959.

<sup>219</sup> Dora Sowden, “Music Vital,” *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.



admirers regularly besieged *Kong*'s African cast.<sup>220</sup> Some factions of white society admitted that its composer now "must take his place as one of the greatest composers South Africa has produced. White or non-White."<sup>221</sup> Another critic asked if "there [were] better instrumentalists than this bunch for this type of music anywhere in the world?"<sup>222</sup>

Beyond simply recognizing the talent of their black countrymen, Johannesburg's white mainstream became vocally and adamantly supportive of African musicians and actors. One letter to the editor proclaimed that this All-African musical "must go." Instead of suggesting that the authorities throw them off-stage, however, this reader demanded, "'King Kong' must appear on Broadway! It is not an idle fancy; my guess is, that the Americans would love it and of one thing I am convinced – 'King Kong' deserves a broader market than it can possibly get at its present venue."<sup>223</sup>

In addition to recognizing the talent of its African cast, the white press celebrated the interracial nature of the play, described by one newspaper as "a composite job."<sup>224</sup> Many applauded the work of the white organizational and production team (particularly Gluckman), for transforming this collective of amateur actors into a cohesive, professional-looking whole as nothing short of remarkable. Whereas one *Sunday Tribune* writer had usually "bitten my nails at talent going to waste" at African performances, she

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<sup>220</sup> Joe Louw, "King Kong IS GREAT!", *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>221</sup> "Big plans for 'King Kong'," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 5, 1959.

<sup>222</sup> "A Successful All-African Musical," *South African Jewish Times* (Johannesburg), February 6, 1959.

<sup>223</sup> Hans Hofmeyer, "'King Kong' must be staged on Broadway," *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 16, 1959.

<sup>224</sup> "King Kong!—You've Never Seen Anything So Real On The S.A. Stage Before," *Sunday Express* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

was relieved that “Leon Gluckman has taken 63 artists and moulded them into a vibrant, superbly trained whole” while maintaining “the unspoilt vitality, the natural grace and dignity of his cast.”<sup>225</sup> Such sentiments were echoed within the black press, such as the *Golden City Post*, which stated that Gluckman “whose inspiring efforts have established a milestone in the history of Non-White entertainment deserves the biggest bouquet in the world.”<sup>226</sup>

In a combination of African talent and noble cross-racial sentiment, *King Kong* signaled the possibility of an alternative South Africa where blacks and whites co-existed and interacted in worthwhile, respectable ways. It promoted a newly perceived understanding or respect across apartheid’s racial boundaries. “When we consider this talent,” wrote a reviewer for the *Sunday Times*, “we must acknowledge the genius of this people whose creative greatness is yet to flower.”<sup>227</sup> Considering *King Kong* as an indication of South African society in the then-very near future, Martin Jarrett-Kerr, Chairman of the Arts for the Federation of South Africa, claimed in various newspapers across the region:

I think that the long-term significance of “King Kong’s” immense success, even as merely a commercial venture, will not be lost upon the thoughtful citizen. Even the convinced Nationalist will applaud that here money has been raised on a large scale for non-whites by non-whites.

But more; whatever Pretoria may say, here not only does African theatre come of age, but South Africa is, above all, being given a demonstration that the townships have ‘arrived.’

No amount of talk about ‘separate development’ about ‘Bantustans’ and ‘Balkanisation,’ can conceal the fact that the urban African on the stage and in the audience, walking the streets with us, his mother working in our back yard, his brother making tea in the office, is now a ‘westernised’ person.

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<sup>225</sup> Molly Reinhardt, “Why can’t Durban see this ‘miracle’ opera?”, *Sunday Tribune* (Durban), February 8, 1959.

<sup>226</sup> Joe Louw, “King Kong IS GREAT!”, *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>227</sup> “It’s King-Size!”, *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

He will not and cannot go 'back to the Reserves.' And he matters. He is going to matter more and more. The revolutionary turmoil among the black men further north will, surely take a different form here.

For here we have a rising middle-class, a 'townie,' a bourgeoisie with a culture, a self-assurance and a poise which the conservative might well see as a barrier against anarchy.<sup>228</sup>

Rather than fearing this development, Jarrett-Kerr welcomes *King Kong* and the arrival of urban Africa as a positive to South African society. Such sentiment essentially ran counter to the direction in which South Africa was moving before February 1959.

Similar to the white press, black magazines and newspapers overwhelmingly presented glowing (and frequent) reviews of this "jazz opera."<sup>229</sup> However, the reaction and positioning of *Kong* differed slightly. Despite being "for everybody," the play signified something for the black papers of African arrival, recognition and modernity. Due to *King Kong*, African culture and the "language of the township" emerged as "universal" ones for South Africa as a whole.<sup>230</sup>

In the wake of the destruction of Sophiatown and the forced relocation of its inhabitants, mounting legislation restricting black life, and increasing crackdowns on black political leadership, *King Kong* represented a major cultural, political and emotional victory for the nation's African population. Thus the press positioned *King Kong*'s success within the larger context of the black race's struggle for recognition and respectability. One report from the *Golden City Post* stated:

And then, brother, a long line of booms, crashes and whams before you find that you have the neatest package in our showbiz in the last 300 years.

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<sup>228</sup> Martin Jarrett-Kerr, C.R., "What 'King Kong' meant to the Union and what may follow," *Rhodesia Herald* (Salisbury), *Cape Argus* (Cape Town) and *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 18, 1959.

<sup>229</sup> It was not uncommon for periodicals like the *Golden City Post*, *Drum* or *The World* to run multiple Kong-related articles.

<sup>230</sup> Joe Louw, "King Kong IS GREAT!", *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

And this is the package you is gonna buy at the University Great Hall tomorrow [opening night]. 'King Kong' is a project that landmarks what many of our artists have been striving to achieve for a long, long time!<sup>231</sup>

Additionally, *King Kong* moved one coloured journalist to tears, who claimed, "they are tears of exultation, for I feel that a new era in Non-White entertainment has been born with the production of King Kong."<sup>232</sup>

Beyond being "a milestone in entertainment," many within black society viewed *King Kong* as the dawn of a new black art form that could respectfully represent and speak for the community. Singlehandedly due to *King Kong*, the *GCP* announced that "Our Theatre comes of age."<sup>233</sup> "There are many, many bouquets to be handed out – the whole conception of the show is remarkable and what 'Porgy and Bess' means to the Negro of America," remarked one reviewer for *Zonk!*, "'King Kong' will mean to us."<sup>234</sup> Despite the fact that *King Kong* drew heavily from American style and musical formats, it signaled a new era of African stories and life being depicted on stage, rather than simply imitating their African American peers across the Atlantic Ocean. *Zonk!*'s review of *King Kong* continued:

The days of imitating (often poor imitations) American artists have passed. This era of show business certainly served its purpose, it spotlighted the latent talent possessed by our African artists, it also went to show that we were capable of great things, but let's face it, it was not our own – there was nothing African about our theatre.

Now, after hard work and plenty of courage, the "King Kong" team has come up with something that is really our own, really African and above all real theatre.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> "Show Chatter," *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 1, 1959.

<sup>232</sup> Joe Louw, "King Kong IS GREAT!", *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>233</sup> "Can't We Keep 'King Kong'?", *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>234</sup> "'Sold Out' Notice at Ticket Office – Show will go on Tour," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), March 1959.

<sup>235</sup> "'Sold Out' Notice at Ticket Office – Show will go on Tour," *Zonk!* (Johannesburg), March 1959.

This prediction of a new “really African” theatre turned out to be true, as various African musicals based off the *Kong* format took place throughout the 1960s.<sup>236</sup>

Beyond the play’s importance within African entertainment and theatre, the idea of South Africa’s white population overwhelmingly supporting this “all-African musical” particularly pleased the black public and press. The *Golden City Post* noted, “The Cadillacs [*sic*] and the Diamonds and even the Minks (though the evening was warm) turned out for the gala first night of ‘King Kong.’ It was the smartest audience ever to attend one of OUR shows—or anybody else’s.” The newspaper further added, “There must have been several thousand pounds worth of perfume wafting through the auditorium – that sweet smell of success.”<sup>237</sup>

Despite its widespread publicity within the black press and the interracial nature of the seating, it appears that the overwhelming majority of audiences were comprised of white men and women, as Tucker, the founder of Show Service (a major ticket selling agent in Johannesburg), estimates that two thirds of audiences were European.<sup>238</sup> With Africans “paying the same price as Europeans,” the lack of Africans in the audience was recognizable, as one African reporter observed, “[t]here was only a sprinkling of US in the audience.”<sup>239</sup> These disproportional numbers of African audience members appear to result from the distance to the Great Hall from African townships scattered on the

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<sup>236</sup> “‘King Kong’ music,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 12, 1959.

<sup>237</sup> “Lowdown,” *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg) February 8, 1959.

<sup>238</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

<sup>239</sup> “Lowdown,” *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

outskirts of Johannesburg, and the fact that “the opening tickets were way up in the guineas.”<sup>240</sup>

Despite the disproportionately low number of Africans in the audience, they apparently purchased enough tickets to cause Show Service to reconsider box office feasibility of productions that could reach both black and white audiences. “For the first time I was dealing with a multi-racial public,” Tucker recounts, “and I realised how large a potential audience was out there if only they were free to attend the theatre, and how healthy this would be for the livelihood of the profession and the managements.” This notion remained ingrained in Tucker, and he would even cite his experience with *Kong* sales when arguing against “racial discrimination in theatres” during the 1970s.<sup>241</sup>

Though priced out of the economic sphere of many within the black working classes, it does seem that *King Kong*’s Johannesburg-run was welcomed by many. Those African and coloured individuals who could afford to attend often did so multiple times or wished they had. “I would not mind seeing the show once more,” quipped *The World*’s Leslie Sehume.<sup>242</sup> *Golden City Post* and *Drum* columnist/sub-editor Bloke Modisane, who had long advocated for theatrical performances for non-European audiences and the launching of African drama, admitted later in his autobiography that he took in, at least, ten different performances of this one production.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> “Lowdown,” *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

<sup>241</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 132.

<sup>242</sup> Leslie Sehume, “King Kong in Song,” *The World* (Johannesburg), February 7, 1959.

<sup>243</sup> Modisane does admit that part of his motivation was due to “the volatile appeal of Miriam Makeba.” See Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 295-6.

For many (including the family members of the African performers), it represented “the first time” ever seeing a theatrical production or Africans performing “in an integrated setting.”<sup>244</sup> Sensing the symbolic importance of *King Kong*, Modisane took his mother, a shebeen queen and hardly a member of the educated African elite, to the second night of the musical. “Ma Bloke” viewed this occasion as so significant that she needed to specifically purchase a new, fashionable outfit “as she had complained of not having anything to wear appropriate for such a great event.”<sup>245</sup> Similar to “Ma Bloke,” Makeba’s mother, a practicing *sangoma*,<sup>246</sup> had “never seen a play before” nor attended the theatre before *King Kong*.<sup>247</sup> Beyond these examples, it appears that African segments of the audiences were sizeable enough that they often made themselves known by giggling or the “sniggling” during *Kong*’s performances.<sup>248</sup>

With such support by the press and general public across the races, the only crisis for the production’s Johannesburg run was that it could not fully satisfy the public’s appetite to see the musical for themselves. In Tucker’s autobiography on his life within

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<sup>244</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 98.

<sup>245</sup> Modisane, *Blame Me on History*, 296.

<sup>246</sup> A *sangoma* is a diviner within Southern Africa’s *Ngumi* populations (namely Swazi, Zulu and Xhosa) who is said to receive and transmit messages from past ancestors.

<sup>247</sup> Makeba remarks how her mother reacted to seeing *King Kong*, “The big scene at the end comes when I am being strangled by the boxer. A scream fills the theater. But it is not mine. It is my mother! She thinks that I am really being killed. She screams, ‘My child! My child!’” See Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 70.

<sup>248</sup> This behavior appears to have been similar to the cinema where Africans audiences loudly and regularly yelled out in reaction to a film. See “Wanted: an inventor with his sniggle detector,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), 3 February 1960; R. Gluckman, “Snigglers were not ‘superior’ Whites,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), 16 February 1960; Usiyazi, “Talk of the World,” *The World* (Johannesburg), May 16, 1956; and De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 58.

South African show business, he details the immense task of selling *King Kong* due to the production's gigantic popularity:

*King Kong* was the biggest hit Show Service had ever handled. Public response was huge and immediate, and queues stretched for blocks from our office to beyond the Jeppe Street Post Office. My elation at this success was tempered by the enormous problems I faced in supplying tickets to an eager and demanding public. I had four cashiers working exclusively on the show, non-stop from 7 a.m. till 6 p.m. The pressure was intolerable... I calculated that, provided we could confine each transaction to two minutes, we could serve a thousand people a day. I devised a system whereby I walked up and down the queue, giving people a numbered slip of paper with a day and a time when they should come back. Without this 'system', we would have had people lining the streets for days.<sup>249</sup>

In addition to the lines outside the box offices, the company's phone lines became so flooded that it received, as Tucker told the press in February 1959, "eight complaints from the Telephone Department about congestion on our lines."<sup>250</sup> Through such accounts, one senses the enormity of *King Kong*.

"Within a week" the musical sold out its "entire five-week run," much to the delight of those involved as well as the USAA and AMSTF, who possessed financial stakes in the production, and, according to Tucker, "the demand for seats could have kept it going indefinitely."<sup>251</sup> Desperate fans offered "[b]ribes and incentives" to Tucker and his employees in hopes of securing reservations while his "poor mother in Benoni" was "besieged with callers" trying to procure his personal phone number in hopes of being able to finagle tickets.<sup>252</sup> This near-hysteria over *King Kong* tickets caused peculiar situations within the queues. Reports surfaced of "a messenger-boy almost distraught because he had been given an hour off by the boss to get tickets; and did not know

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<sup>249</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 131-2.

<sup>250</sup> Tucker was ultimately forced to take the company's phone off the hook. See "Rush to see 'King Kong'," *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 5, 1959; and Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 131-2.

<sup>251</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 131-2.

<sup>252</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 132.



whether to take an extra seven hours off, or return without them” and “the white woman who jumped the queue, saying that she had failed to get tickets last time and this time she was jolly well going to succeed—and she was not going to stand waiting behind a lot of Natives.”<sup>253</sup> Soon the press began reporting on rumors of “a black market” developing specifically to acquire tickets to the production.<sup>254</sup>

Despite extending the run at the Great Hall for another week, *King Kong* could still not keep up with audience demands for more shows.<sup>255</sup> This situation became a news story in itself as both the press and the public appealed for this issue to be addressed. The *Golden City Post* pleaded for government intervention as if this ticket crisis were a national or city-wide tragedy:

Because of its immense fun and vitality, and because it compares favourably with almost any imported stage production in the last few year, ‘King Kong’ deserves to pack ‘em in—Black and White—for months. Yet, because of lack of a venue under the present crazy set-up, this piece of truly NATIONAL Theatre has been booked for a mere three weeks in Johannesburg.

Can’t the leaders of South African entertainment do anything about it?”<sup>256</sup>

Beyond being welcomed by audiences for its presentation of township life, the talent of its performers, its inter-racial courage or pure entertainment, it appears that audience members sometimes gleaned hidden or unintentional meanings teased from the play’s content. Though Matshikiza conceived and composed “Sad Times, Bad Times” two years prior in response to the two sudden deaths of notable African personalities,

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<sup>253</sup> Martin Jarrett-Kerr, C.R., “What ‘King Kong’ meant to the Union and what may follow,” published in *Rhodesia Herald* (Salisbury), *Cape Argus* (Cape Town), and *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 18, 1959.

<sup>254</sup> “‘King Kong’ to tour S. Africa,” *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), February 15, 1959.

<sup>255</sup> The University of the Witwatersrand had already booked another production for use of its Great Hall and thus *King Kong*’s staging could not be prolonged further.

<sup>256</sup> “Can’t We Keep ‘King Kong’?”, *Golden City Post* (Johannesburg), February 8, 1959.

journalist Henry Nxumalo and comedian Victor Mkize, politician Nelson Mandela sensed instead that it was written as a hidden expression of sympathy for the anti-apartheid cause. Esmé Matshikiza remembers in *Mandela: The Authorised Portrait*:

During the interval we all went out into the foyer and there was Nelson. When he heard ‘Sad Times, Bad Times’, he had a completely different perception about what it was saying. Nelson interpreted it as being to do with the Treason Trial. We were all standing together: Nelson, Winnie, Todd and I. I think Todd left it at that. He suddenly thought, well, it also fits the situation of the Treason Trial.<sup>257</sup>

Conversely, conservative audiences sympathetic to the apartheid state sensed similar hidden messages in *King Kong* or meanings within its lyrics or music. A reviewer for Cape Town’s Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* claimed that the drum beat after “King Kong” kills “Joyce” was Morse code, “...—, ...—. Dot-dot-dot-dash. The letter V for Victory.” Consequently, he claimed that it “sounds through the strike of midnight, like a voice which calls for the red of a new morning. And red is the colour of blood.”<sup>258</sup> Thus the critic presented the musical as a secret call to arms or unrest.

It would be false to claim that the entire public welcomed this musical. Instead, the production faced its fair share of critics, but often the near absurdity of their comments and critiques demonstrates how much the play pleased the bulk of mainstream societies within Johannesburg. One segment of the population that apparently disliked the musical consisted of the friends and supporters of the actual “King Kong.” His former manager Ben Jele told *The World* that it was disrespectful to use his name without the consent of his family and objected that *King Kong* “is composed of musical artists, not

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<sup>257</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview, in Maharaj and Kathrada, eds., *Mandela: the Authorised Portrait*, 84.

<sup>258</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 67.

boxers, and 'King Kong' was a fighter—not a show artist.” “According to our Zulu custom, when a man is dead we respect him and we should not even use his name,” Jele claimed, and added, “I beg the sponsors of this play to change the name of the play to that of ‘All Artists Play.’”<sup>259</sup>

For more conservative and racist Afrikaner segments, *King Kong* signified a wake-up call as single-handedly this “all-African” musical had more of an impact on South African society and culture than any similar effort proffered by Afrikaans theatre. “It is wise to take proper notice of the production and to weigh its implications,” warned one *Die Transvaaler* columnist.<sup>260</sup> “King Kong is in the true spirit of the African. Now we must produce plays in the spirit of White Africa,” South African producer and actor Brian Brooke told the Pretoria Women’s Club.<sup>261</sup>

Such criticisms, however, were predominantly drowned out by the public’s approval and delight with the production. With the record’s wide circulation and public descriptions of the play spreading throughout the greater population of Johannesburg, *King Kong*’s popularity and influence on society reached well beyond the Wits Great Hall, for, as De Beer declares, “Todd’s tunes were everywhere.”<sup>262</sup> “Before an admiring pavement audience of Rosebank servants,” reported one newspaper, “a Native re-enacted scenes from this bouncy jazz opera.”<sup>263</sup> Reports even surfaced of “Dunkeld ‘madames’” being “twitted so unmercifully by” their own “washerwomen” humming the tunes from

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<sup>259</sup> “Respect Name of King Kong,” *The World* (Johannesburg), January 31, 1959.

<sup>260</sup> “Talks In Pretoria On ‘King Kong’,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 12, 1959.

<sup>261</sup> “Talks In Pretoria On ‘King Kong’,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 12, 1959.

<sup>262</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 54.

<sup>263</sup> “Pavement ‘Kong’,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 12, 1959.

the show and “everyone who whistles in *The Star* building whistles its tunes all day.”<sup>264</sup> De Beer claims that she and Glasser personally observed “a porter [at the Jan Smuts airport] whistling ‘Little Kong’ as he hustled about with his load of suitcases.”<sup>265</sup>

For children viewing the musical or listening to the record too, *King Kong* seems to have possessed a lasting effect.<sup>266</sup> In his aforementioned collection of poetical reflections on his childhood memories of growing up in Johannesburg, author Denis Hirson mentions *King Kong* as well as the play’s performers several times and even entitled this collection, *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)*.<sup>267</sup> “I remember that, as far as I was concerned,” writes Hirson, “the original *King Kong* was about a champion township boxer... The film, about an ape who kidnapped a beautiful woman, must have stolen its name from the play.”<sup>268</sup>

In some instances, the goodwill spawned by this “jazz opera” actually translated into everyday life. *King Kong*’s influences on audiences spanned further than the conceptual team or the USAA presumably ever even imagined. With the musical seemingly came a spirit of goodwill and appreciation across racial lines. Matshikiza remarks that, at one point, one white man that he did not know (nor did the man know Matshikiza) approached him at some point in 1959 and shockingly told him:

Wait a minute. Wanna talk to you. You know something? I work for a gramophone company. We jus’ been making a record by some of your musicians, an’ you know what? Some of your musicians are a damn sight better than some of these white boys who call themselves musicians.

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<sup>264</sup> “Townships get ‘Kong’,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 18, 1959.

<sup>265</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 54.

<sup>266</sup> One of my *isiZulu* professors once told me that the *King Kong* album was one of the first records that her family owned and that she listened to it so much that she memorized all the songs.

<sup>267</sup> See Denis Hirson, *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2005).

<sup>268</sup> Hirson, *I Remember King Kong*, 16.

That record is something, my boy, Good for your people. You mus' buy it. It's called *King Kong*. Never mind all that [political] nonsense going on.<sup>269</sup>

The fact that the play compelled a random white man to approach a black stranger seems to hint that the entire *King Kong* project compelled many to rethink and at least temporarily refashion their treatment of the nation's African underclass. One African wrote *The Star* saying, "I hope there will be good relations in this country between Black and White after the African jazz show 'King Kong' has been shown in all centres, especially those who assault Africans."<sup>270</sup>

### **Touring South Africa (Or Not)**

As rumors of the musical's success spread, newspapers in various cities across South Africa and Southern Rhodesia were bombarded with inquiries about whether this musical would come to a venue near them. Columnists and readers alike regularly appealed via local newspapers for officials to make any concession necessary to stage the show in their municipality. "Come on, whoever is in charge of the City Hall," demanded one writer, "Cancel some of those bookings and let Natal see this superb production."<sup>271</sup> Another writer claimed in *Natal Daily News* that failing to get *King Kong* to Durban

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<sup>269</sup> Todd Matshikiza, "King Kong Comes to London," *Queen* (London), February 15, 1961.

<sup>270</sup> E. Scotty Morolo, "'King Kong' and race relations," *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 11, 1959.

<sup>271</sup> Molly Reinhardt, "Why can't Durban see this 'miracle' opera?", *Sunday Tribune* (Durban), February 8, 1959.

“would be a blow to civic pride if we were to miss it.”<sup>272</sup> For populations in Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, their prayers were answered and the musical did tour there.<sup>273</sup>

In Pretoria, the symbolic heart of apartheid, where venues open to mixed race audiences were not available, fans were inevitably disappointed and became distraught. Though some hardliner groups like the Afrikaanse Kultuurraad vocalized support for this decision, it appears that the decision angered many of Pretoria’s residents.<sup>274</sup> For furious white would-be audiences in Pretoria, in particular, the state’s rationale in banning *King Kong* seemed ridiculous. Thus it appears that this may have been one early instance where the mainstream white population was forced to sacrifice under apartheid and it infuriated them. The *Pretoria News* believed that local officials were “in danger of creating a cultural backwater”<sup>275</sup> and added a few days later that “[t]his must be one of the sacrifices apartheid is said to entail. Unhappily it is culturally crippling.”<sup>276</sup> Leontine Sagan, a prominent playwright based in Pretoria, described the city’s refusal to allow *King Kong*’s staging in a proper theatre as “beastly behaviour.”<sup>277</sup>

Compounding matters further, the prevention of *King Kong*’s staging came nearly at the same time as the national government’s Informational Service announced that it

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<sup>272</sup> “King Kong for Durban?”, *Natal Daily News* (Durban), February 10, 1959.

<sup>273</sup> On a side note, it does appear that reception to the musical was much stronger in Johannesburg than anywhere else, as De Beer notes that the play’s reception in Cape Town was “not as enthusiastic as those of Johannesburg”. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 65-7.

<sup>274</sup> “Pretoria thanked for barring the show,” *The Star* (Johannesburg) February 20, 1959; and “Kongless But Unbowed,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 21, 1959.

<sup>275</sup> “Case of King Kong,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 11, 1959.

<sup>276</sup> “Insult to Injury,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 13, 1959.

<sup>277</sup> “Council Offers ‘King Kong’ Tent Space,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 13, 1959.

would be featuring the play's LP recording in various South African embassies abroad.<sup>278</sup> Similarly, the Minister of Native Affairs came out in support of *King Kong*'s staging in cities like Pretoria whereas the Minister of Education, Arts and Science vocally condemned such an idea.<sup>279</sup> Such actions only further highlighted the often contradictory and near-schizophrenic behavior of national and local governments in preserving apartheid ideals and enforcing its policies.

Thus for a significant segment of white South Africans, the absurdity of banning this relatively innocuous musical highlighted larger concerns within apartheid philosophy, as a reader claimed that the Pretoria Council's actions would "make Pretoria the laughing stock of the country."<sup>280</sup> One *Sunday Tribune* columnist argued, "Does it mean that the urbanised and Westernised African of Johannesburg must journey to an ancestral stamping-ground in the fastnesses of the Transkei and perform 'King Kong' there in the moonlight on the 'steekgras' under a spreading stinkwood tree?" He continues, "[W]here are the Europeans to see such productions... Or must the Europeans be prevented from seeing such performances altogether?"<sup>281</sup> A member of the public in Port Elizabeth questioned, "Is this then the pattern that apartheid is to follow?" "If apartheid crushes artistic expression," he further added, "then the fault lies with

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<sup>278</sup> "Embassies get 'King Kong' recordings," *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 11, 1959; "Information Service Gets 'King Kong'," *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 11, 1959; "Recordings of 'King Kong' go abroad," *Natal Daily News* (Durban), March 12, 1959; and "Recordings Of King Kong For Overseas," *Friend* (Bloemfontein), March 12, 1959.

<sup>279</sup> "Kongless But Unbowed," *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 21, 1959.

<sup>280</sup> Off With Their Heads, "King Kong: City Made 'Laughing Stock'," *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 17, 1959.

<sup>281</sup> Stephen la Rochelle, "asks," *Sunday Tribune* (Durban), March 8, 1959.

*apartheid.*”<sup>282</sup> Though stopping short of railing against the entire system of apartheid, such sentiments marked discontent with just how separate the state desired to keep the races under apartheid. With Pretoria’s refusal to augment its laws in order to allow a staging of *King Kong*, it made a clear statement to the nation that even apartheid’s benefactors, the white population, would too need to make inconvenient and painful sacrifices.

A particularly scathing editorial in the paper demonstrates how this seemingly minor matter of staging (or not staging) a musical represented more important underlying issues left unaddressed by the government and it read:

It [the local city council] is aware of the public desire to see ‘King Kong’ and the disappointment and even anger that is felt at the difficulties that have arisen. On the other hand it fears to take a decision that might offend other sections.

In the background there is always Government policy. This may at present be only a convenient excuse, but it is a fact that Government is making it more and more difficult to take an independent line in matters of this kind.

Ultimately the Government, especially in Pretoria, will have to give a lead which others will no doubt be ready to follow. We have drawn attention to the problem of diplomatic representation of non-White States, a problem which cannot be shelved indefinitely.

It is in Pretoria, traditionally least flexible in apartheid matters, that this problem will become acute. The controversy over ‘King Kong’ shows how acute it might be if and when the Union decides that it must exchange envoys with African States....

“King Kong,” in fact, marks the end of one road. Neither Pretoria nor the country can afford to remain at this dead end for ever.”<sup>283</sup>

Though the Pretoria city council offered the possibility of staging the musical in a tent “in the Agricultural Show Grounds,” this option presented too many challenges to the

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<sup>282</sup> Shocked, “King Kong in Pretoria tent,” *P.E. Evening Post* (Port Elizabeth), February 21, 1959.

<sup>283</sup> “Fresh Start Needed,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), February 16, 1959.



production (as well as leaving a bad taste in the mouth of the play's organizational team) and they soon abandoned the idea of staging *King Kong* in Pretoria.<sup>284</sup>

### **Complete Collaboration or Continuing with Apartheid?**

Despite Pretoria's objections, many inevitably held *King Kong* as an example of interracial cooperation that could potentially guide South African society. For some, it seemingly met the public's demands for such action voiced throughout the past decade.

In May 1958, a writer for *Contact* contended:

Until Africans can have the opportunities of widening their horizon, of hearing European music, of playing with Europeans, of exchanging ideas with European and Coloured musicians from elsewhere the future looks bleak indeed.

Gramophone records are not enough. Music can only progress when musicians meet on equal terms, play together and exchange ideas. Until that is possible there seems little hope of full development for African music, jazz or otherwise.<sup>285</sup>

*King Kong* typified such exchanges and togetherness. The production itself hoped that it, as the play's Johannesburg program states, "might yet transcend the political stresses and strains that lie so near the surface in South Africa."<sup>286</sup>

With these points made, however, one must question to what degree *King Kong* was a truly interracial endeavor. It would be naïve to assume that such a radical and creative endeavor could take place in the setting of 1950s apartheid without tensions occurring. It is difficult to pin down how much apartheid policies seeped into the staging of this particular production and interactions between its black and white members.

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<sup>284</sup> Pieces of the play were eventually staged in Pretoria during preparations for taking the *King Kong* musical abroad to London in 1961.

<sup>285</sup> "Players Off Beat," *Contact* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1958.

<sup>286</sup> *King Kong* program (Johannesburg), Leon Gluckman papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

Often it seems that feelings regarding this issue vary with those involved. Additionally, it appears that former participants' memories of their involvement in the musical often changed over time with the political climate of each era. During the 1980s, for instance, Andersson felt the need to include "two separate accounts of the musical" since "there is still much controversy about '*King Kong*.'"<sup>287</sup> After decades of living in exile and during the height of the 1980s anti-apartheid movement, Masekela demonized much of *King Kong*'s white leadership, particularly the USAA. He claimed, "We were never really paid for that work [orchestrating the music]." He also claims that he earned only £15 a week "while King Kong was raking in hundreds of thousands."<sup>288</sup> In his own autobiography published well after the fall of apartheid, on the other hand, he describes his involvement as "a tidal wave of good luck" and that "the money was delicious."<sup>289</sup> "For all of us this was a new experience," Masekela further reflects, "a combination of talented people of different races working united in the creation of an exciting project."<sup>290</sup>

While virtually all involved in the musical cherished their time with the production and regularly refer to it as a highlight within their careers, fissures did take place, and some within the production "have not always seen eye to eye in their struggle for perfection."<sup>291</sup> Certainly such disagreements over creative control erupt in virtually every theatrical production. With this production, however, the stakes within these

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<sup>287</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 32.

<sup>288</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>289</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 97.

<sup>290</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 98.

<sup>291</sup> "£5,500 goes into 'King Kong' musical," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), January 13, 1959.

disagreements seem to possess further weight as they regularly fell (or at least appear to do so within the historical record) along racial lines.

In certain ways, the play shattered conventional norms regarding the treatment of African performers under white management. Regarding payment of the African cast and band, in particular, it appears that the production and the USAA did attempt to maintain standards that they would have of white performers, if not more so if one considers the hiring of a bus service for ferrying the African participants to their homes each night and the entire cast was paid “through the whole of the rehearsal period” while most of the white organizational team took unprecedentedly low salaries.<sup>292</sup> Furthermore, during the play’s earliest conceptual stages, Matshikiza claims that organizers “went around selling it [*King Kong*]” and that “big music people” were unwilling to collaborate with the project due to the project’s demands that Africans get paid a set, respectable wage (to which the record companies responded, according to Matshikiza, “[M]an, are you mad? Besides you’re spoiling these boys, they’re used to playing for five bob a night”).<sup>293</sup>

In certain instances within the historical records, it appears that personal ruptures did take place between the cast and the directorial team, as the play’s African cast did on occasion feel overworked. In response to such claims, De Beer remembers Gluckman responding:

I don’t care a damn if the voices are feeble and the cast half-dead. This is the first time the Africans are getting a chance to show what they can do. I want the audience to enjoy an evening of fully professional entertainment. We’ve had enough patronizing whites saying “How

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<sup>292</sup> “King Kong,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), December 12, 1958.

<sup>293</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 122.

sweet” and “How clever”. They are going to forget that they are watching a bunch of black people. They are not going to be given the opportunity to “make allowances”. Every cue is going to be right on time, every speech word perfect, every moment self-assured, if it kills them—and me.<sup>294</sup>

With such statements being made, it appears that *King Kong*’s white organizational team truly strove to strike a blow for the African cause under apartheid, and thereby to better the lives of the African cast and friends.

In their personal interactions, many crossings of apartheid’s color lines took place and various lifelong friendships were forged through the play’s staging.<sup>295</sup> On a micro-level, it was these sorts of camaraderie and personal interactions that the apartheid state frowned upon. It strongly disdained the racial mixing that occurred due to an endeavor like *King Kong*, as those involved with the production had long been visiting the homes, *shebeens*, and various hangouts of other races.<sup>296</sup> At the opening night’s after-party, Masekela remembers the police threatening “to arrest everybody for conspiring to contravene the Immorality Act.”<sup>297</sup> In this regard, it seems that the apartheid state had made the correct assumption, as interracial affairs did take place between the cast and the play’s white organizers and directors. Modisane describes such displays at the very same party described above, “[I] found myself saddened by the promiscuousness of the South African society, men were making advances at each other’s wives; white men were glued

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<sup>294</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 46.

<sup>295</sup> Mogotsi, for instance, became lifelong friends with Leon Gluckman and the two regularly visited with one another until Gluckman’s death. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 101-3.

<sup>296</sup> John Rudd, for instance, regularly frequented Modisane’s abode in Sophiatown. See Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, 297.

<sup>297</sup> Instead of meeting the demands of the police, the hosts and partygoers remained “defiant, hoping mass arrests of the *King Kong* cast and their distinguished guests would be good publicity and a further embarrassment for the racist regime.” See Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 98.

to African women in a dance which was like fornicating on the dance floor, white women were sandwiched between walls and African men.”<sup>298</sup> In addition to such displays at the after party, John Rudd, an executive with De Beers and chairman of *Kong’s* First Night Committee, and Dottie Tiyo, a former member of the *King Kong* chorus, were both arrested and convicted two years later for violating the Immorality Act in May 1961 nearly two years after *King Kong’s* debut.<sup>299</sup>

Many involved in the project, particularly its white participants, present *King Kong’s* staging as defying the conventional norms and status quo of South African society. Tucker remarks, “It was a bizarre situation: cooks, nannies, gardeners, messengers and delivery ‘boys’ by day became equals of the white production team by night and were then delivered back [following rehearsals] to servants’ quarters. I was much affected by this anomaly and could only guess at how the people concerned coped with their schizophrenic existence.”<sup>300</sup>

For the black participants, this experience was certainly most humiliating. At one moment, they were collaborators on this highly groundbreaking project. The next they needed to ask their white peers, deemed superior by the apartheid state, to sign their pass books or write notes literally excusing them for being in white residences or locations past curfew.<sup>301</sup> Masekela claimed, “They [the white people working on *King Kong*]

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<sup>298</sup> Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, 295.

<sup>299</sup> Both served six months in prison. See “Dotty Tiyo, Miss South Africa, The Zsa-Zsa Gabor Of The Reef” in Jurgen Schadeberg, *The Fifties People*, 161; “Dottie and the Director,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), August 1961; and Nat Nakasa, “London for Me,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1962.

<sup>300</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 129.

<sup>301</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 121.

could be called I suppose, liberals – but on the other hand they had all these people being exploited by them on the mines.”<sup>302</sup> Matshikiza further intimates that the organizational and directorial staff generally possessed paternalistic approaches to Africans, underestimated the constraints placed on non-Europeans under apartheid, and seemingly sought to exploit the play’s African participants to inform them how *King Kong* should be organized and presented. In *Chocolates For My Wife*, he writes:

I think King Kong will make a marvellous [*sic*] excuse for a theatrical production, your people are so much alive especially for this sort of thing.

I think it’s perfect for any innuendos. I will put some of the language down as spoken in the townships, can you give me a few phrases, for instance what do you say when a policeman approaches, what is the lingo?

More and more white people came around black people telling us to never mind the regulations let’s go to Rupert’s place and put down as much African lingo as we can although Rupert’s place is in the heart of the White kingdom and blacks are shot at sight after nine, ‘specially if you’re talking some lingo.

“Tell us Gwigwi, how did King Kong, who was King Kong, how, where, what was he? Dance us the dance of joy. Tell us how he lived. We know how he died.”<sup>303</sup>

Thus it seems that the play’s white participants could not truly move beyond apartheid-like mindsets in preparing for this interracial production, or were so perceived by the play’s African composer, cast and orchestra.

Whether or not such claims are valid, the nation’s social norms indeed did seep into the organizing of the play itself despite being a play countering conventional norms under apartheid. Rarely, if ever, were society’s proscribed roles of European as *baas* (Afrikaans for “boss”) and African as subservient underling broken or flipped. With the exception of Matshikiza, the entire organizational team and directorial staff of *King Kong* were white. Many committee meetings also took place with little to no input from

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<sup>302</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>303</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 121.

African representatives of either the cast or the USAA itself. De Beer herself notes, “The First Night Committee meetings had been held in an opulent Johannesburg restaurant which contrasted starkly with the dingy rehearsal rooms.”<sup>304</sup> This organizational format was typical of the locally made African films from earlier in the decade, where African talent scouts and musical directors assembled much of the material and performers, which white producers and directors subsequently molded in their own creative visions. One must question, for instance, why Matshikiza, Sol Klaaste, Mackay Davashe or Wilfred Sentso was not named music director for the production.<sup>305</sup> “They [the *King Kong* orchestra] had more experience than I in jazz idiom. And they learned from my technical experience”, Glasser himself admitted to reporters.<sup>306</sup> Whether or not it was this “technical experience” or the organizers’ distrust of an African to lead an orchestra of this sort remains unclear.

The influence of Dover’s choreography too remains an interesting topic for consideration. De Beer describes Dover’s difficulties within choreographing the production, claims he “needed tremendous patience”, and notes his notable achievements with the world of dance. Though Dover recognized, as he told De Beer, “indigenous [African] movement is most virile rhythmic,” he added that “[u]nfortunately there is *no*

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<sup>304</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 50.

<sup>305</sup> Sentso was an African teacher and musician who possessed both significant experience as a conductor and strong interest in the performing arts. See Christopher Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1994), 36-7 and 59-60.

<sup>306</sup> “King Kong is sold out on the Rand,” *Port Elizabeth Evening Post* (Port Elizabeth), February 12, 1959.

training whatsoever, and this limits a choreographer tremendously.”<sup>307</sup> It seems that the cast, on the other hand, viewed Dover’s contribution in a slightly different manner. Instead of directing and choreographing specific routines, Mogotsi notes that Dover’s greatest strength was in giving the cast freedom to perform their own moves and routines, and he writes, “Arnold did well in adapting the show to utilise our natural talents by allowing a great freedom of movement.”<sup>308</sup> Though confessing that he and his cast mates “were not used to the disciplined choreography required for a theatrical production”—and therefore Dover’s input aided in translating such routines into an organized theatrical dance routine—Mogotsi adds that “the choreography was easier [than other aspects of the musical] as most of the cast were good movers and many of us experienced dancers with our own groups.”<sup>309</sup>

One possibility for such behavior may be due not to the mindsets of *King Kong*’s white brain trust but instead to their true inability to escape the social norms dictated by apartheid society itself. Due to pass and curfew laws (in addition to transportation concerns), the individual mobility of the play’s African participants hindered one’s ability to attend all-night directorial meetings. The unavailability of restaurants, businesses and lobbies open to Africans inside (outside of the establishment’s own staff) presumably prevented African representatives from attending meetings with record executives and sponsors. Additionally, within the complex and often hypocritical norms of South African society under apartheid, such donors, businesses and organizations willing to

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<sup>307</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 14 and 37.

<sup>308</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.

<sup>309</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 63.



help this “all-African” theatrical production would potentially be willing to meet with African representatives or accept the fact that Africans could be bestowed a position of leadership with other white representatives in the room.

Todd Matshikiza’s personal experiences with the production are particularly telling of the difficulties that arrived with such interracial and intercultural collaboration. Publically, Matshikiza offered overly idealized imagery of his involvement with the musical, as he wrote in his April 1959 column for *Drum*:

What’s it like to be in *King Kong*? ‘It’s like dreaming all your life, one day I’ll be important an’ useful an’ happy.’ Suddenly that dream comes true, an’ you’re singing an’ acting an’ passing important ideas to over a thousand people in the University Great Hall, Johannesburg. The lights are bright, the handclaps loud. There are bow ties an’ mink. Dresses posh, black an’ pink. It’s delirious but not dementing.<sup>310</sup>

Here Matshikiza’s writing indicates that an overwhelmingly positive depiction of his involvement with the musical. In his autobiography, on the other hand, he presents a rather dark picture of the conceptual and rehearsal stages of *King Kong*:

That time onwards began the most arduous time of my life. Every night I dreamed I was surrounded by pale skinned, blue-veined people who changed at random from humans to gargoyles. I dreamed I lay at the bottom of a bottomless pit. They stood above me, all around, with long, sharpened steel straws that they put to your head and the brain matter seeped up the straws like lemonade up a playful child’s thirsty picnic straw. I screamed, yelled myself out of the nightmare, and fell off my bed each night I saw the brain straws. I dreamed Black names were entered from the bottom of the register and White names from the top. And when a black man told a white man to go to hell, there was no hell. And when a white man told a black man to go to hell, the black man did go to hell.<sup>311</sup>

It is within this recollection that one realizes that the “behind-the-scenes” interactions between white and black participants were probably not as idealistic and utopian as many claimed within the press and to the public. Sensing that the white production team was

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<sup>310</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “With the Lid Off,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1959, reprinted in Todd Matshikiza and John Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off: South African Insights from Home and Abroad, 1959-2000* (Johannesburg: M&G Books, 2000), 14.

<sup>311</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 122-3.

squeezing him out of his rightful credit for much of the musical, Matshikiza told Goldreich, “Tell them [*Kong*’s organizers] to stop writing me in the register from the bottom, and having meetings without me although it’s about my music.”<sup>312</sup>

The intense effort of shaping this abstract concept into a full-blown professional theatrical production, in addition to frustrations over the distortion of his vision as composer and major contributor to *King Kong*, proved particularly taxing for Matshikiza, who himself described this period as “the most arduous time of my life.”<sup>313</sup> Consequently, he suffered from severe exhaustion or possibly a nervous breakdown. Motsitsi remarks about seeing Matshikiza during this stage: “He [Matshikiza] was acting funny. Jumping like a Mexican jelly bean and almost turning cartwheels. I thought he had gone bonkers. I heaved a sigh of relief after I had later learned that the doctors had probed and come up with the conclusion that the matter with Todd was just [a] nervous breakdown. Nothing that a good rest couldn’t take care of.”<sup>314</sup> In *Chocolates*, Matshikiza himself claims, “I am on the brink of a nervous collapse because I have been listening to my music and watch it go from black to white and now purple.”<sup>315</sup> Thus it appears that seeing his own particular vision distorted by the work of his other collaborators deeply hurt Matshikiza. His frustration with the entire production caused him to personally disdain Bloom, and at the play’s premiere, he even “had to be pushed on stage.”<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 122-3.

<sup>313</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 122.

<sup>314</sup> Casey Motsisi, “Todd Matshikiza,” in Mutloatse, ed., *Casey & Co.: Selected Writings of Casey ‘Kid’ Motsisi*, 92.

<sup>315</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 125.

<sup>316</sup> See “Street noises inspired Todd’s music,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), February 6, 1959.

To some of the play's white directors and organizers, Matshikiza's complaints presumably seemed unwarranted, as they too possessed their own visions of the play. "Todd was very against it when we started. He was an obnoxious bugger," Bernhardt told Andersson, "against the union probably because there were whites involved."<sup>317</sup> In the end, these resentments and frustrations on the part of all parties involved were probably best summed up by John Matshikiza when he wrote, forty years following *King Kong*'s 1959 premiere, "Its final form was a compromise that no one was entirely happy with."<sup>318</sup> He continues, "It emerged through a process of improvisation, negotiation and sheer blackmail, and then went through a further process of adaptation to suit the abilities of a cast who, for the most part, had no theatrical experience whatsoever."<sup>319</sup>

Despite the slights volleyed between all parties, it seems that both Gluckman and Glasser escape much criticism. Bernhardt claimed, "[T]here would still have been no production if two very talented South Africans (Gluckman and Glasser) had not returned to the country from overseas."<sup>320</sup> Similarly, Masekela described these two as "the greatest human beings to come out of white society. They really worked hard to make King Kong happen."<sup>321</sup>

Beyond the personal interactions between *King Kong*'s black and white contributors, the play's content has also been called into question. Although scholars and

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<sup>317</sup> Andersson, *Music in the mix*, 32.

<sup>318</sup> John Matshikiza, "An incomplete masterpiece waiting in the wings," *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), February 5-11, 1999.

<sup>319</sup> John Matshikiza, "An incomplete masterpiece waiting in the wings," *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), February 5-11, 1999.

<sup>320</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

<sup>321</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 34.

activists of later decades would condemn the play's inability, or perhaps lack of courage, to directly condemn and denounce apartheid, it seems that it would be unrealistic to expect a project aiming to amass record box office profits and garner as much goodwill to accomplish such a feat.<sup>322</sup> Instead, the play's conceptual team hoped that the mere presentation of African life, culture, dance, and music in a professional manner would be enough of a statement to confront white South African society's rampantly racist or paternalistic tendencies.

Like Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *King Kong* only exposed (or perhaps diagnosed) the symptoms plaguing African society on the Reef, such as crime, gangsterism and poverty, rather than vocally isolating the ultimate cause to such problems, which inevitably was apartheid. In addition for the USAA's and AMSTF's own needs to recoup their sizeable investments, *King Kong*'s organizers hoped to draw from various segments of South African society rather than just appealing to those opposed to the apartheid state, already sympathetic to the African struggle under apartheid. *King Kong* needed to toe a difficult line of portraying African life while not alienating apartheid's supporters and its detractors. Furthermore, in the era of the Treason Trial and increased harassment of anti-apartheid critics by various governmental authorities, any outward criticism of the state and its staunchly racist policies could potentially lead to the show being closed down. Additionally, the topics of crime and gangsterism within African neighborhoods and townships across the Witwatersrand were

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<sup>322</sup> See Robert Mshengu Kavanaugh, *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa* (London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1985), 98-101.

very real problems by 1959. Newspapers and magazines catering to both white (i.e. *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Star*) and black readerships (i.e. *Drum*, *The World*, *Golden City Post*) regularly reported such problems. Crime indeed was a real concern for Africans, and bringing such widespread attention to this plague was presumably an anti-apartheid message in itself. Despite any claims of racism or inconsideration that may be lobbed at various factions within the production, the overall sense for all parties was that this particular production transcended much of the barriers set up by apartheid and society's norms.

## Conclusion

In October 1959, the musical's domestic run came to an end.<sup>323</sup> *King Kong* revealed the feasibility of appeasing both white and black South African populations. Not only could theatre reach non-European audiences, but if allowed to do so, it could make the entire industry itself exponentially more profitable. Estimates put it between 120,000 and 200,000 South Africans of all races and backgrounds had seen the musical through its five-city run with over 50,000 seeing the musical in Johannesburg alone.<sup>324</sup> These figures are even more impressive when one considers that the tour ended, as Bloom claims, "not through lack of audiences, but because there were no theatres without colour

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<sup>323</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 99.

<sup>324</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 64; De Beer, "Publisher's Preface" in *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, no page number; Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 127 ; "50,000 See 'King Kong' And £30,000 Goes to Bodies," *The Star* (Johannesburg), April 11, 1959; and Bill Boone, "'King Kong' Comes to Town," *The Evening News and Star* (London), February 4, 1961.

restrictions that permitted bookings of more than a few weeks.”<sup>325</sup> By the tour’s conclusion, *King Kong* grossed “£65,000 in just over 100 performances”<sup>326</sup> with “the proceeds to the African Medical Scholarships Trust Fund of a single week’s run would be sufficient to train one African doctor.”<sup>327</sup>

Beyond financial terms, *King Kong* found other successes. It proved interracial productions could be successful and appease crowds from across the South African population spectrum. Additionally, it infused a sense of goodwill with its stagings. Detailing *King Kong*’s larger impact on South African society, Bloom claims in his foreword to the 1961 *King Kong* book, “The audience, as well as the critics, were carried away in a flood of relief and goodwill, that was example of one of the rare emotional miracles that sometimes occur in the tricky world of race relations. Whatever the motives, the Johannesburg public clasped *King Kong* to its heart.”<sup>328</sup>

Though later developments like the Sharpeville shootings of 1960 caused many anti-apartheid intellectuals to “realise how small and powerless” those dedicated to racial equality and fighting injustice actually were, and caused the demise of his potential “new and exciting Bohemia,” both *King Kong*’s making and reception demonstrated the possibility as well as feasibility regarding interracial endeavors.<sup>329</sup> To many within its

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<sup>325</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 19.

<sup>326</sup> “Dame Peggy Enthuses,” *Plays and Players* (London), March 1961.

<sup>327</sup> When the AMSTF ended in 1961, according to Murray, it had “raised £70 000 (R140 000) in slightly over a decade,” and “had enabled 16 African doctors to graduate from Wits, with 5 remaining to complete their degrees.” It does appear that, at least, a significant portion of these funds came from *King Kong*. See De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 50; and Murray, *Wits: The ‘Open’ Years*, 324.

<sup>328</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in Bloom, *King Kong: An African Opera* (book), 18-9.

<sup>329</sup> Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 24.

African cast, white directorial team, and the public at large, it stood as an icon of delightful defiance against apartheid.

## Chapter Three

### “Kwela Kong”: The Trials and Tribulations of a South African Musical Abroad

Shortly after its 1959 debut, word of *King Kong* and its box office success spread to the two main epicenters of modern theatre: Britain and America. “For the first time ever, American and British producers flew out to take a look at a South African show,” notes Percy Tucker, “rather than the other way around.”<sup>1</sup> The most notable of these foreign producers was British jazz impresario and band leader Jack Hylton. Upon learning of the musical’s success from a business associate who saw one of the early shows in Johannesburg, Hylton sent his son-in-law, composer Hugh Charles, to scout the musical as well as Leonard Schach’s *Try for White*, a play about coloured South Africans attempting to “pass” for whites, in hopes of bringing either to London’s West End.<sup>2</sup> Instead of signing Schach’s play, Charles decided to, as De Beer puts it, “Try for Black.”<sup>3</sup> After some negotiations between Hylton’s organization and the USAA (relying heavily on its sponsors and business associates, such as local business executive Robert Loder),

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Tucker, *Just the Ticket!: My 50 Years in Show Business* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1997), 133.

<sup>2</sup> Charles composed two particular songs, “There’ll Always Be An England” and “We’ll Meet Again”, that were popular in Britain. See Mona De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre* (Cape Town: Norman Howell, 2001), 75; Ralph Trewhela, “*Song Safari*” (Johannesburg: The Limelight Press, 1980), 115; and Tucker, *Just the Ticket!*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 75.



Hylton via Charles purchased an “option” to bring the play to London, which was soon exercised and Hylton tapped Gluckman to direct the West End production of *King Kong*.<sup>4</sup>

By 1961, it appeared that British society was well-suited to wildly receive this “all-African musical,” as it possessed significant interest in jazz music, musical theatre and South Africa. In order to ensure its success, the company took further measures of additionally tailoring the musical to cater to the tastes of West End audience.<sup>5</sup> Unlike in South Africa, where the play was widely applauded and must be considered an overwhelming success, the British press and public reacted in a nearly opposite manner. Despite the popularly held belief that the social climate throughout Britain was well-suited for this particular “jazz opera,” this chapter argues that conditions mostly beyond the control of the production—mainly the inability of British audiences to accept an African production that largely railed against their preconceived stereotypical notions of African culture, and the growing distaste for apartheid South Africa—ultimately undermined the musical’s reception abroad.

This chapter is divided into seven sections in order to fully tell the story of the experiences of the *King Kong* musical in 1961 Britain.<sup>6</sup> The first provides a history of Jack Hylton’s career with British music and show business. It uses his own story within

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<sup>4</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 75; and Schedule of Arrangements for Princess Margaret’s visit, 95.2.4.5.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>5</sup> I choose “Kwela Kong” for the title of this chapter, because *kwela* music was one of the initial South African music forms to popularly reach London by 1961, and the incorporation of *kwela*-like art forms were designed to better fit the tastes of British audiences.

<sup>6</sup> When I first conceptualized this chapter, I proposed to analyze how the African cast and orchestra members adjusted to life in Britain. As this chapter grew and grew in size, I decided to eliminate this section for the dissertation. I do, however, plan to include this section during my future revisions of this project into a book manuscript where I will focus almost exclusively on how the African reacted to life abroad.

British show business to convey his significant status as a promoter/impresario in London by 1961 and to briefly tell the larger story about the trends of popular jazz music and theatre in Britain by the time of *King Kong*'s premier. Following my analysis of the performative climate within Britain and how it potentially suited the musical, the chapter explores how Hylton and *King Kong*'s production team repackaged the musical in hopes of further insuring its success on the West End. This chapter then briefly analyzes the expectations that the British public and press as well as the company itself possessed for this imported and well-hyped "all-African musical."

The proceeding sections then dissect how the actual production was received by the British critics. It is here that one realizes that British audiences and critics possessed far different desires for *King Kong* than their peers in South Africa. I argue that the musical failed to capitalize on the preliminary hype that welcomed it on its arrival, and that British critics did not appreciate the musical due to their own preconceived notions of black South African culture and black life under apartheid, in addition to the musical's own weaknesses. Lastly, the chapter concludes by examining how the lackluster reception of *King Kong* throughout the United Kingdom ultimately undermined its chances to perform in America, a hope that most involved in the production viewed as their ultimate goal.

### **Jack Hylton, Theatre and Popular Music in Britain**

It is fitting that this "jazz opera" would be produced and promoted by Jack Hylton. For much of the twentieth century, he was a key force in British popular culture,

particularly in the realms of popular music and theatre. Hylton's career as both a performer and impresario were emblematic of the trends within British show business during much of the twentieth century. It is my concern in this particular section, therefore, to familiarize the reader with the states of British popular music and theatre in 1961, as well as to demonstrate Hylton's place within British society during this period, since each factor seemingly set the stage for *King Kong*'s predicted successes on the West End.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, jazz music had already begun infiltrating British society, particularly in London.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-1920s, jazz was breaking into mainstream music circles, particularly in London (the first jazz-related story within the popular media, for instance, appeared in London's popular music magazine, *Melody Magazine*, in 1926) while simultaneously forging its own British style and identity. Jackson "Jack" Hylton featured prominently in both regards.<sup>8</sup> Born in Lancashire, Hylton moved to London in 1913 and began playing professionally around that time.<sup>9</sup> After joining the "Queen's Dance Orchestra" as the group's second pianist,<sup>10</sup> he assumed leadership of the group in 1921, which subsequently morphed into "Jack Hylton and his Orchestra" a year later.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he and his band (featuring

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the early history of jazz music in Britain, see Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* ( Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 385 cited from Jerome Harris, "Jazz on the Global Stage," in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Journey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 113.

<sup>9</sup> "Hylton, 'Jack' Jackson" in John Chilton, *Who's Who of British Jazz* (London: Cassell, 1997), 170 and Stanley R. Nelson, *All About Jazz* (London: Cranton, 1934), 115.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> "Hylton, 'Jack' Jackson" in Chilton, *Who's Who of British Jazz*, 170.

notable local jazzmen like Claude Ivy and Arthur Young) surfaced as one of the nation's top dance bands and reportedly had "no superior; as a box-office attraction he cannot be equaled."<sup>12</sup> His stature grew enough that Hylton emerged, according to Stanley Nelson, British jazz critic and author of the then-definitive text on British jazz entitled *All About Jazz* (1934), as "Europe's King of Jazz".<sup>13</sup> His status acquired significant respect within global jazz circles that American tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins approached Hylton and his band to accompany him on his 1934 tour of Britain.<sup>14</sup>

Britain's formation of a home-grown jazz scene was further emboldened in 1935 (just months following Hawkins's tour) when the nation's Musician's Union successfully lobbied the British Ministry of Labour to effectively bar any American musicians from performing in the UK.<sup>15</sup> While some American jazz performers, such as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, occasionally bypassed these laws by passing themselves off as variety artists, this governmental policy effectively divorced Britain's jazz scene from the center of the jazz world, America.<sup>16</sup> Though jazz aficionados could still access American jazz music through records and cinema, live performance became a domestic-only affair. Local musicians, accordingly, flourished without competition from their American peers

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<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Hylton wrote the foreword to Nelson's text. See Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 48 and 112; and Jack Hylton, "Foreword" in Stanley R. Nelson, *All About Jazz* (London: Cranton, 1934), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Rye, "Fearsome Means of Discord: Early Economics with Black Jazz," in Paul Oliver, ed., *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 55.

<sup>15</sup> The American music unions and government soon followed suit, and the two jazz scenes remained significantly disconnected from one another until the 1950s. See Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had it so Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006), 455; and Paul Oliver, "Introduction," in Oliver, ed., *Black Music in Britain*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Hylton's own proposed tour of America was cancelled due to these passed restrictions on the American side. See Stanley R. Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 80.

and developed their own style, sound and approach to the art form. Having already made a name for himself prior to the ban, Hylton further benefited from these policies as he filled the vacuum left by the dearth of American musicians and emerged as an even more prominent performer within domestic music circles. His music and news of his strong reputation even reached South Africa, and many members of *King Kong* were fully aware of Hylton well before his organization's involvement with the South African production.<sup>17</sup>

Through his own showmanship and business acumen in addition to his band's success, Hylton aided in the legitimization of jazz music by transforming it into a respected genre across Europe. His music became accepted by Europe's high-class elites, even impressing Russian composer Igor Stravinsky.<sup>18</sup> Detailing his approach to bringing jazz music from the fringe to the mainstream, Hylton writes, "I have seen a gradual moulding of the public taste in popular music in the direction of the best Jazz, and I have done my best to follow that trend. I believe that the really best Jazz orchestras have been instrumental in bringing before the public much that is good in music in a manner at once entertaining, instructive and original."<sup>19</sup> Almost simultaneous to his legitimization of jazz, Hylton also began reaching the masses; as Nelson remarks, "he is out to please the public, and not to educate it."<sup>20</sup> Believing that jazz music offered a benefit to society

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Mogotsi with Pearl Connor, *Mantindane, "He Who Survives": My Life with The Manhattan Brothers* (Copenhagen: The Booktrader, 2002), 69.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 70 and 116.

<sup>19</sup> Hylton, "Foreword," in Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 112.

“which is every bit as important as that of the opera house and concert hall,” Hylton aided jazz music transcending into both mainstream and upper-class music circles.<sup>21</sup>

Other popular music forms, namely rock n’ roll and skiffle (a fusion of folk, jazz, blues and country music genres), pushed jazz towards the margins of society during portions of the 1940s and 1950s, but many in Britain believed by the conclusion of the 1950s that rock n’ roll was a passing fad and that jazz music would resurface as, in the words of British historian Dominic Sandbrook, “the soundtrack to the 1960s.”<sup>22</sup> As opposed to previous eras, the stakes within popular music were much greater due to the sudden rise in music consumption in Britain, as the populace purchased 52 million singles in 1961 whereas they had only bought roughly 4 million six years prior.<sup>23</sup>

Though jazz never truly dethroned rock n’ roll within the UK (due in part to the rise of bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones), the genre did undergo a renaissance of sorts during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a major genre within British popular music. By this time, however, the domestic jazz scene was no longer a unified whole. Though popular audiences still demanded “more superficially exciting music,” a new generation of British jazz musicians like alto saxophonist Johnny Dankworth emerged pushing an “original course which was experimental without being cerebral” and thus “modern-styled jazz became a force to be reckoned with in this country.”<sup>24</sup> With this shift, a “rift” festered within British jazz, as Sandbrook notes, “between on the one hand

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<sup>21</sup> Hylton, “Foreword,” in Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 479.

<sup>23</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 456.

<sup>24</sup> David Boulton, *Jazz in Britain* (London: W.H. Allen, 1959), 86-7.

the various revivalist camps, for whom ‘authentic’ jazz had ground to a halt before the war, and on the other those who embraced the more intricate and self-consciously sophisticated harmonies of modern New York bebop.”<sup>25</sup>

This rift can be partially attributed to the increasing exposure of British jazz fans to American jazz music, as the longstanding ban of American musicians performing on British soil was lifted in 1956.<sup>26</sup> This dismantling of the musical “iron curtain” resulted in a near flood of American jazz performers touring the UK, as Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Lionel Hampton, Dizzy Gillespie, Lester Young, Oscar Peterson, Ella Fitzgerald, and Miles Davis performed in the UK between 1956 and *Kong*’s premier in 1961.<sup>27</sup> This influx of these foreign performers further heightened the popularity of this historically American art form, while also exposing British audiences to performers who were widely considered more skilled and experimental than their own domestic musicians.

Into this era and its debates around what jazz music is entered South African jazz via *King Kong*. Not truly fitting any particular category by Western notions of jazz, this rift within British jazz confronted the musical and its performers. Throughout the 1950s, black South African jazz and its siblings, such as the pennywhistle laced *kwela* music, did

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<sup>25</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 479-80.

<sup>26</sup> Oliver, “Introduction,” in Oliver, ed., *Black Music in Britain*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Oliver, “Introduction,” Oliver, ed., *Black Music in Britain*, 80; Todd Matshikiza, “With the Lid Off,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1960, republished in Todd Matshikiza and John Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off: South African Insights from Abroad, 1959-2000* (Johannesburg: M&G Books, 2000), 73; Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 459; and Hugh Masekela with D. Michael Cheers, *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 118-9.

trickle into British markets.<sup>28</sup> In 1958, the Jake Lerole-led Elias and his Zig-Zag Jive Flutes' *kwela* classic, "Tom Hark," according to music scholar Lara Allen, "almost managed to top the British Hit Parade."<sup>29</sup> South African jazz, which Jonas Gwangwa described as "like jazz with an accent," could either be accepted or rejected by both factions of the British jazz community, which could have ultimately shaped *King Kong*'s reception in Britain.<sup>30</sup> Sandbrook indicates that a major facet of jazz's strength was its ability to simultaneously be both American and British, and thus it remained unclear how this South African jazz, which was neither, would be received.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the collective invasion of American jazz performer in the UK set the bar for any other foreign musician. In comparison to these well-established, well-polished American entertainers, these South African performers (who largely received little formal music training) would inevitably fall short, as opposed to back in South Africa, where only a minute slice of European populations were exposed to jazz and thus immediately gravitated to the musical.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond the backing of a veteran jazzman like Hylton, *King Kong*, the production, its performers, and South African jazz music in general, possessed notable supporters

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<sup>28</sup> A story in *The African Drum* notes that Willard Cele's "Penny Whistle Blues" and "Penny Whistle Boogie" caused "a big stir both in Johannesburg and London." See "Success Story," *The African Drum* (Johannesburg), March 1951.

<sup>29</sup> Lara Allen, "Kwela's White Audiences: The Politics of Pleasure and Identification in the Early Apartheid Period," 79, 95 in Grant Olwage, ed., *Composing Apartheid: Music For and Against Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Jonas Gwangwa, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift :The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 339.

<sup>31</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 483.

<sup>32</sup> This point will be further demonstrated in future chapters, as I argue that American performers like Miles Davis believed that South African jazz musicians, such as Hugh Masekela, did not possess the technical refinement needed to compete in the American jazz scene.



within British jazz circles, including Dankworth, his wife the lyricist Cleo Laine, violinist Yehudi Menuhin, and drummer Jack Parnell.<sup>33</sup> After various visits to South Africa during the 1950s, these musicians formed solid bonds with black performers, including those who went on to participate in *King Kong*, and sympathized with the plight of black South Africans musicians who found their careers hindered by the racialist policies of the apartheid state. Influenced by these trips to South Africa, British jazz musicians increasingly spoke out on behalf of the anti-apartheid struggle (Dankworth himself turned down a tour, which would have paid him £10,000, to play in South Africa during the late 1950s due to his own affinity for interracial interaction).<sup>34</sup> By 1957, Dankworth and other members of the British jazz community, along with Lionel Hampton, threw a fundraising concert for Christian Action's South Africa Treason Trial fund.<sup>35</sup> Hence it appeared that the UK's jazz community would overwhelmingly come out in vocal support of this South African "jazz opera."

These developments are vital to understanding *Kong*'s reception, as Britain possessed a large, loyal, and knowledgeable jazz listening audience by 1961. As traditional jazz sales in Britain indicate, the genre spanned young and old generations

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<sup>33</sup> Such performers had either toured South Africa years earlier or became significantly involved in jazz music fund raising concerts for various anti-apartheid causes. See "'African Jazz' Big Hit in Durban," *Hi-Note!* (Johannesburg), July 1953, 35; "U.S. Editor To Send Music To Union," *The World* (Johannesburg), April 6, 1957; George McKay, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 123-4; and John Dankworth, *Jazz in Revolution* (London: Constable, 1998), 106-8.

<sup>34</sup> It is important to consider that Dankworth had married black singer and actress, Cleo Laine, in 1958, and thus was perhaps more apt to lash against racial segregation and racist thinking than most British performers.

<sup>35</sup> Dankworth, *Jazz in Revolution*, 107-8; and McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 124.

while successfully straddling popular music and pure jazz markets.<sup>36</sup> Potentially, these audiences formed a sizeable market that could potentially be drawn from for the musical, as the music's fans tended to be educated and middle-to-upper class, both groups who were more apt than the working-classes to attend a theatrical show.<sup>37</sup>

After breaching mainstream music audiences, Hylton spread his reach beyond jazz to film, variety shows and theatre throughout the 1930s, and he moved into the role of impresario, show business mogul and talent agent by 1940.<sup>38</sup> His business acumen made him terribly successful and powerful in British theatre, and Hylton was financially involved in ten shows on London's West End, with nearly 1,200 artists on his payroll by 1956.<sup>39</sup> His organization was also responsible for discovering talents, such as Shirley Bassey, and developing them into major figures of stage and song.<sup>40</sup> As a result of such profitable endeavors, he was widely known for going "from success to success" within the entertainment world as a whole.<sup>41</sup> While his involvement in a project could not necessarily guarantee its success, he certainly possessed a noteworthy reputation for turning out both hits and hit makers. His involvement in both the London Philharmonic

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<sup>36</sup> Sandbrook points out that a traditional jazz compilation album, entitled *The Best of Ball, Barber and Bilk*, topped the British music charts in 1962. See Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 482.

<sup>37</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 479.

<sup>38</sup> "Hylton, 'Jack' Jackson" in Chilton, *Who's Who of British Jazz*, 170.

<sup>39</sup> Pamela W. Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 116.

Orchestra and the Anglo-Polish Ballet reportedly “saved” the two organizations, as he subsequently repackaged them into profitable enterprises.<sup>42</sup>

The post-war period ushered a boom in British theatrical production, and by 1961, it reached a peak in popularity.<sup>43</sup> While British theatre grew in scope and themes, the mainstay of the musical remained a dominant part on the West End. The most profitable musicals drew considerable profits, as *My Fair Lady* reported a West End record-setting profit of £138,381 between 1961 and 1962.<sup>44</sup> Partially responsible for the popularity of the musical within British theatre was the arrival of American musicals like *Primrose*, *Oklahoma*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *West Side Story* and *Porgy and Bess*. Far from a new trend (since Irving Berlin and George Gershwin-made musicals surfaced on the West End during the 1920s and 1930s), this trend picked up considerably by 1961 as numerous American musicals, such as *West Side Story* and *Flower Drum Song*, were being staged on London’s West End at the same time of *King Kong*’s run.

Though experiencing surges in both interest and production, British theatre still only represented, as Sandbrook notes, “a minority interest, and only one in every two hundred people attended regularly.”<sup>45</sup> Since it was predominantly supported by Britain’s middle-to-upper classes, one actor remarked that “[t]he real working class has nothing to do with the theatre today. The railway porter, the chap on the fish dock in Hull, they’re

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<sup>42</sup> Leo Kersley, “Mr. Jack Hylton” in Mary Clarke, ed., *The Dancing Times*, Vol. LV, No. 654, March 1965; Nelson, *All About Jazz*, 115-6; and “Showman,” *Reynolds* (London), Feb 19, 1961.

<sup>43</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 186.

<sup>44</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 197.

<sup>45</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 186.

not interested...’’<sup>46</sup> As opposed to high-brow theatre, musical productions proved much more effective in reaching across class divides. The album sales of such productions perhaps best demonstrate the popularity of the genre between the mid-1950s and early-1960s, as the top three selling albums in each year were soundtracks to various theatrical or cinematic musical soundtracks between 1956 and 1959 regularly beating out the likes of Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and local London-born rocker Tommy Steele.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the success of musical productions and the corresponding sales of their soundtracks, theatre in Britain faced a precipice during the post-war era as radio, cinema, and television were increasingly reaching for a much greater percentage of the British public than theatre ever could. Television, in particular, rapidly grew during this period as it represented a visual medium that was more affordable for Britain’s working-classes, who rarely took in theatrical productions. Like he had with jazz and theatre, Hylton too played a major role in the formation of British television. Beyond owning a portion of Television Wales and West (TWW) with his business partner, Lord Derby,<sup>48</sup> he took a role in advising and hosting a show for the newly formed Independent Television (ITV) in September 1955. With his own prestigious reputation, wide connections within show business and his deep stable of performers to draw from, Hylton significantly shaped

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<sup>46</sup> Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 196.

<sup>47</sup> Four musical soundtracks placed in the top ten selling albums of 1956 (their positions were 1, 2, 3 and 10), three placed in 1957 (1, 2, 3), six placed in 1958 (1, 2, 3, 4, 8), four in 1959 (1, 2, 3, 10), and three in 1960 (1, 5, 8). The Billboard charts in the United States indicate that similar trends took place in America as well during this time frame. The data from these charts were obtained from [http://www.theofficialcharts.com/album\\_chart\\_history.php](http://www.theofficialcharts.com/album_chart_history.php) (Accessed on January 14, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents*, 1; and “Showman,” *Reynolds* (London), Feb 19, 1961.

early television programming throughout the UK, and as Pamela W. Logan argues, “the words ‘Jack Hylton Presents’ heralded some of the greatest names in British variety as well a whole host of faces which were new to television.”<sup>49</sup> These performances brought him great success on television, and his *Jack Hylton Presents* television program regularly found itself in the top ten in both the TAM and Nielsen ratings.<sup>50</sup>

Ironically, television’s success severely retarded the growth of British theatre, and thus Hylton actively contributed to the demise of his primary business interests of stage acts. Logan argues:

For Hylton, a workaholic with interests in film as well as theatre, the chance to get involved in television must have seemed a godsend. It would have appeared the perfect medium for promoting his shows and artists, and he seems to have been convinced that TV would build stars for the theatre while at the same time exploiting existing celebrities from the stage. He probably thought that with a foot in both camps he couldn’t lose. He could not have foreseen that TV would sound the final death knell for variety theatre.<sup>51</sup>

Failing to recognize this “final death knell,” Hylton misread television’s effects on domestic theatre, and therefore it seems that Hylton may have begun losing his touch with British audiences by the staging of *King Kong* in London. Though well-established and well-known throughout the UK by 1961, Hylton was nearly seventy years old at the time of the musical’s debut on the West End. Furthermore, he was unquestionably nearing the tail end of his career, as he had already curbed his own performing and would produce his last theatrical production in 1963. Thus it may be that Hylton did not

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<sup>49</sup> Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents*, 4.

command the stature that he previously possessed in Britain between the 1930s and 1950s.<sup>52</sup>

Regardless of the potential waning of Hylton's own career, the combination of these factors listed above seemingly signaled that a musical like *King Kong* could expect, at least, meager success in 1960s Britain. It could potential draw upon Britain's jazz and popular music fans, already sizeable audiences of musical theatre, growing South African ex-pat community, and members of the increasingly popular anti-apartheid movement as well as benefit from the attention brought on by the words "Jack Hylton Presents" above the production's marquee. Taking all of these aspects into account, Hylton decided to take a chance and invest significant capital in bringing *King Kong* to London's West End.

### **Bringing *King Kong* to the West End**

Immediately after Hylton's signing of the *King Kong* musical, he, his business partners, the USAA, its production team, its cast and orchestra members, and the British press all shared high expectations for the show. While no one can ever fully predict the success of any entertainment endeavor, many believed that the performance climate within Britain widely favored the musical. British show business personalities visiting South Africa, such as British actress Dame Sybil Thorndike and Dame Peggy Ashcroft, believed that the production's originality would suit the West End, and according to

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<sup>52</sup> Hylton died at seventy two years old in January 1965. See "Hylton, 'Jack' Jackson" in Chilton, *Who's Who of British Jazz*, 170; and Logan, *Jack Hylton Presents*, 57-8 and 65.

Mogotsi, “there would be a good reception for such an original show, they assured us.”<sup>53</sup>

Additionally, it seems that Hylton believed the show would face, at least, moderate success on the West End, since he invested so much capital, approximately £40,000, in bringing the show to Britain.<sup>54</sup> Though it remains unclear just how much profit he believed the show could potentially take in, it was presumably sizeable as the ticket agency servicing the production reportedly “guaranteed the show £45,000.”<sup>55</sup>

Beyond investing significant amounts of capital, Hylton and his organization (along with the USAA) devoted much time and effort in securing passports for the African members of the cast and orchestra. In an unprecedented move for any other professional theatrical production in South African history, the company applied for passports for the entire sixty-plus member African cast and band. In order to convince the apartheid state to grant such passports, the state needed assurances that the musical or any of its cast members would not make any politically embarrassing statements. Additionally, the state desired guarantees that the African participants would be well looked after or perhaps monitored. Consequently, the USAA and Hylton guaranteed that “[c]ontracts [that are] drawn up for the artists will not fall below the standard Equity minimum” deposits of £100 per applicant would be paid to the state, “return fares” will be assured, “[a] Welfare Officer is being appointed to supervise the activities of the artists and to make them familiar with London’s customs,” “[m]inors in the theatre in England are in any case protected by English Council laws making it imperative for a

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<sup>53</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> “The King Kong Cuties,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Jackson, “‘King Kong’ wages probed,” *Daily Express* (London), March 1, 1961.

matron to accompany them to and from the theatre”, and “[a]rrangements are being made to repatriate a portion of each artist’s earnings for maintenance of their families in South Africa.”<sup>56</sup>

As early as March 1959, the apartheid state had already identified *King Kong* as a source of good press for its separate development policies. Weeks after its premiere in the Great Hall at Wits, the state began displaying the *King Kong* LP recording in “sixteen of the Union’s Embassies and Legations” alongside recordings of prominent white South African artists.<sup>57</sup> The play’s apolitical nature and dearth of critiques of apartheid made it a potentially attractive public relations coup for the apartheid state though it also meant risking a public relations disaster if the African participants defected abroad (which had taken place with a coloured group touring Sweden years earlier) or vocally came out against apartheid. Due to the potential gains, the South African cabinet decided “to let this cast go” despite objections by lower-level governmental officials throughout the Rand, who deemed that the play’s African cast may “be unfavourably influenced by a visit to a country where there is no racial segregation.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from J. Issacson, Chairman of USAA to Mr. Katzew, the Bantu Affairs Commissioner, May 18, 1960, p. 1 in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.

<sup>57</sup> “Embassies get ‘King Kong’ recordings,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 11, 1959; “Information Service Gets ‘King Kong’,” *Pretoria News* (Pretoria), March 11, 1959; “Recordings of ‘King Kong’ go abroad,” *Natal Daily News* (Durban), March 12, 1959; and “Recordings Of King Kong For Overseas,” *Friend* (Bloemfontein), March 12, 1959.

<sup>58</sup> Handwritten note to A.P. composed by unknown person (signature illegible), September 19, 1960 written on margin of confidential letter regarding “Overseas Passports-Members of the King Kong Cast” from Chief Bantu Affairs Commissioner (Witwatersrand) to the Secretary of the Bantu Administration and Development (Pretoria), September 13, 1960 in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.



After securing permission to take the musical and its performers to the West End, Hylton et al. initiated various alterations to the production in order to protect this sizeable investment and better meet the expectations of the British public. While *Kong*'s original conceptual team certainly had a say in these changes, it appears that the majority of the changes were initiated by the Hylton organization, as Matshikiza remembers a representative telling the production team shortly after negotiations had been concluded, "keep the show going, make the improvements I suggested. Rehearse like mad. Only the best is good enough for London."<sup>59</sup> With these changes, Hylton sought to professionalize the production, and tailor its presentation for the particularities of West End audiences.

Despite being initiated by Hylton, the changes were apparently accepted by the play's conceptual team, as they too agreed that certain adjustments would need to be enacted before taking the musical to the West End. "The original production would not have lasted two nights on the London stage... It was too naive," Goldreich admitted to *The Star* in 1961.<sup>60</sup> Following this cue to enact changes, Gluckman, Matshikiza, Bernhardt, Bloom and others involved in the production embarked on altering the production in order to better prepare it for success on the West End. "Before anything happens in a very big way, there must be a substantial improvement artistically," Gluckman told a notable South African playwright in 1959. "Much will have to be done to it, now that an offer from an overseas theatre management has been forthcoming."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Todd Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 124.

<sup>60</sup> "'King Kong' cast prefer to be with South Africans," *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 1, 1961.

<sup>61</sup> "Leon Gluckman" in Bernard Sachs, *South African Personalities and Place* (Johannesburg: Kayor Publishers, 1959), 153.

Beyond “much tightening of dialogue and lyrics,” the company restructured the play’s format from its original three acts into two acts in order to better “conform with the normal Broadway format for musicals.”<sup>62</sup>

Organizers also inserted “many new arrangements of the music and choreography.”<sup>63</sup> With *Kong*’s original lyricist Pat Williams already residing in Britain, the production brought in Ralph Trehwela, South African music industry-insider and music director on the local film *The Magic Garden* (1951), into the fold as Hylton desired “additional lyrics” for certain songs.<sup>64</sup> Two major additions to the dance routines included a gum-boot dance and more pennywhistle routines.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps drawing cues from reactions by white South African audiences during 1959 or on hunches of what West End audiences would want from an African musical, it seems that such additions were designed to give the play a more recognizably African feel, as they did not look or sound American.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, these were formats of black South African culture that the British public was already accustomed to through *kwela* recordings and cinematic depictions of African culture.

These alterations tested the collective patience and sanity of the production team, and Matshikiza remarks in his autobiography, “We rehearsed like mad. The cast and the

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<sup>62</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 78; and S.V., “‘King Kong’ has a new look,” unnamed paper, no exact date is provided except for that it was published in February.

<sup>64</sup> It remains, however, unclear what lyrics Trehwela contributed. See *King Kong: A Jazz Musical* (program for London performances), author’s collection, 1; and Trehwela, “*Song Safari*”, 115.

<sup>65</sup> Lionel Slier, “*King Kong* and the Jewish Connection,” in *Jewish Affairs*, Volume 61, Number 4 (Chanukah 2006): 72.

<sup>66</sup> Furthermore these changes often were not dances or music styles particularly popular amongst black Johannesburg society. Instead they were predominantly aspects of African culture that white South Africans enjoyed.

band for London. The creators and the producers for a nervous breakdown.”<sup>67</sup> Aside from lobbying the apartheid state to grant passports for the African members of the production, they reworked the show’s format, inserted new material, and prepared the cast for life in Britain all the while continuing with their primary occupations.<sup>68</sup> Compounding matters further, Bloom was arrested during the aftermath of Sharpeville in 1960, and thus was indisposed throughout much of the revising process, which forced other members of the production team to pick up where he left off.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond altering the musical itself, it appears that the production team considered measures to ease the transition to British audiences by attempting to drop much of the slang used in the original version. In areas where they could not stylistically do so, they offered a glossary of “STRANGE WORDS” and phrases in *Tsotsitaal* (which the London program describes as “a special kind of township patois”) within the West End program.<sup>70</sup> Beyond explaining terms like *tsotsi* and *shebeen* (an illegal drinking establishment) foreign to English audiences, the play’s program went even further by telling the audiences what certain phrases like “What dat blue soap of a King Kong is going to do in a booze and cherrie dive,” “If you think you’re gonna Delilah me for dat

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<sup>67</sup> Todd Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 124.

<sup>68</sup> In preparation of the African participants for life in London, the USAA held numerous seminars and lectures on what these Africans could expect about life abroad. Remembering this experience, Mogotsi recalls, “some of us were invited to meet white [South African] families in their homes, to be able to study their manners and social behavior, so that we could cope with the new situation in England... We were given a lecture on what we could expect in London. We were told to respect English institutions, be disciplined and behave properly. We had a lot to learn.” See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 70.

<sup>69</sup> He would later receive further charges on the very day of the London *King Kong*’s first night. See “Cape Town Charge Against Author,” *Times* (London), February 24, 1961 and “King Kong Author Accused on First Night,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>70</sup> *King Kong: A Jazz Musical* (program for London performances), author’s collection, 13.

hunk,” and “It’ll be a circus—make a fool out of king”<sup>71</sup> as well as what kwela music is and what cultures the gum-boot dance comes from.<sup>72</sup> Many of these phrases were included to give *King Kong* an authentic South African feel, but also risked confusing the audience with such terminology.

Aside from significant alterations to the play’s structure and presentation, the London-bound *King Kong* needed to adjust to certain key personnel changes to the cast and band. After briefly signing the musical, Hylton toyed with the idea of staging *King Kong* on the West End using more polished black actors from Britain, North America, Africa and the Caribbean already based in London.<sup>73</sup> After adamant protests from Gluckman, who contended that the play risked losing much of its South Africanness as it “would have no Bus Queue, no Township Sunday, no Kwela dance,” Hylton agreed to maintain the production’s continuity by keeping the South African cast intact.<sup>74</sup>

Despite this decision to retain the African cast, there were key turnovers within the orchestra and cast that needed to be addressed. Beyond the losses of more minor figures in the cast and band like Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa and Ken Gampu,<sup>75</sup> the losses of female lead Miriam Makeba (who had already established herself in America

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<sup>71</sup> These phrases are respectively defined as “What that good-goody King going to do in a drink and girlie hide-out”, “If you think you’re gonna ditch me for that mule”, and “It’ll be a joke”. See *King Kong: A Jazz Musical* (program for London performances), author’s collection, 13.

<sup>72</sup> *King Kong: A Jazz Musical* (program for London performances), author’s collection, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

<sup>74</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 75.

<sup>75</sup> Before the show left for London, Masekela had already defected to America to study at the Manhattan School of Music, and was followed by Gwangwa shortly after arriving in London with the *King Kong* musical. It remains unclear why Gampu was not included in the West End version, but does appear to be due to personal reasons. Though all three emerged as internationally known musicians or actors in later decades, the three were young and inexperienced enough by 1961 that their losses were not as significant as one would believe.

performing with Harry Belafonte) and Daniel Poho (who played “Popcorn” and served as narrator in the original productions) proved difficult to overcome.<sup>76</sup> Numerous critics who had seen both versions of the musical remarked that the loss of such artists severely hindered this revamped *King Kong*. Beyond losing their talent, the musical depended heavily on the singing of the female lead and narration by “Popcorn” (thus the creative team for the 1959 production spent a great deal of effort training these two performers) and essentially needed to find two cast members to replace two of their most important actors.<sup>77</sup> Though many critics praised the ability of their replacements (Peggy Phango and Ben “Satch” Masinga respectively), these defections certainly sapped some of the original production’s vitality.<sup>78</sup> The loss of Makeba specifically was particularly damaging as she “was much more than merely an actress singing” and had already proven an internationally recognized talent under the tutelage of Harry Belafonte by 1961.<sup>79</sup>

Another significant change for the musical was the venue of the Princes Theatre. As opposed to the theaters in which *King Kong* had previously appeared in South Africa, the Princes Theatre was “a real theatre” in that it was specifically built for theatrical

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<sup>76</sup> Despite serving as general secretary for the USSA, the union could not convince the apartheid state to grant Poho a passport due to his links with various political organizations.

<sup>77</sup> Though Makeba possessed little acting experience prior to *King Kong*, her time preparing for . Regarding Poho, he had acted in an Athol Fugard’s *No-Good Friday* prior to *Kong* and was originally slotted into the “Popcorn” role because of this experience.

<sup>78</sup> See M.B., “Stage Producers and Stone Walls,” *Fighting Talk*, October 1960; “Dame Peggy Enthuses,” *Plays and Players* (London), March 1961; S.V., “‘King Kong’ has a new look,” unnamed paper, no exact date is provided within Leon Gluckman’s press clippings except for that it was published in February; and Lionel Slier, “*King Kong* and the Jewish Connection,” *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Chanukah 2006): 72.

<sup>79</sup> Sylverster Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?: A historical Caprice* (London: Corvo, 2003), 220.

performance and could house much larger audiences. “This was not the Great Hall at Wits University. This was purpose built, with special lighting and acoustics and could hold large audiences. We were thrilled to think that we would be appearing on that stage,” Mogotsi remembers, “and a little frightened at the enormity of what was ahead of us.”<sup>80</sup> The theatre’s size is important to note because if *King Kong* failed to pull in packed houses, then it could appear, as Percy Tucker observes, “far too big and barn-like” and give the image of a failed show. Furthermore, despite its location on the West End, the Princes possessed a history of being a venue where shows largely failed (Mogotsi claims many within the cast believed it suffered from “what we called *juju*”). These points indicate that it may have been a poorly designed facility that *King Kong* would have to overcome in order to succeed on the West End.<sup>81</sup> Instead of holding months of rehearsals in London or premiering the musical in an outlying city, which apparently was custom for many productions to work out any kinks, Hylton and Gluckman chose to run the musical for a “short season” in Johannesburg, and take the production to London only days prior to its scheduled West End premiere. This decision presumably retarded the actors’ and crew’s ability to master performing in the physical environment of environments of the Princes Theatre as well as with the theatrical one of London’s West End.

With all these changes made to it, the musical that travelled to Britain was in many ways fundamentally different from the original 1959 version that enjoyed so much

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<sup>80</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 71.

<sup>81</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 71.

success across South Africa. Despite Mona De Beer's claims that the play "remained essentially the same" and "[m]uch of the atmosphere of three years before was recaptured," it seems that these changes fundamentally altered the project, possibly changing it for the worse.<sup>82</sup> Though predicting that "its impact on overseas audiences might be greater," one South African reporter who had "seen the original 'King Kong' almost from its birth" reported that the new version "is over refined" and "one thing seemed missing, the excitement and vitality."<sup>83</sup> Others close to the production who had seen both productions voice similar beliefs, and Tucker remarks, "I had attended the gala performance [in London] and have to admit that the original impact was missing... and I have always suspected that the tampering to cater for English tastes watered down the magic."<sup>84</sup>

Beyond diluting "the magic," the performers themselves may have tired of singing the same songs, playing the same music, and performing the same dance routines (saxophonist Moeketsi claimed that playing the "[s]ame tunes, same tunes, same tunes" made him "frustrated musically")<sup>85</sup> that they had done for nearly two years before the trip to the UK and whilst in London eight times per week (with only Sundays serving as their day off).<sup>86</sup> Hence some of the original "magic" may in actuality have been due to its performers tiring of performing with the musical.

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<sup>82</sup> De Beer, *King Kong: A Venture in the Theatre*, 77-8.

<sup>83</sup> S.V., "'King Kong' has a new look," unnamed paper, no exact date is provided within Leon Gluckman's press clippings except for that it was published in February.

<sup>84</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

<sup>85</sup> Casey Motsisi, "Kippie-Sad Man of Jazz," *Drum*, December 1961.

<sup>86</sup> *King Kong: A Jazz Musical* (program for London performances), author's collection, 1.

### Initial Expectations of this British *King Kong*

On February 7, 1961, the bulk of the *King Kong* cast and band arrived in London, and this storyline of how the musical came to London fascinated many within the press.<sup>87</sup> One reporter claimed that Hylton discovered *King Kong* while “on safari in Darkest Africa” as if he had unearthed a hidden jewel,<sup>88</sup> and it appears the production actively attempted to exploit these stereotypes to attract attention as some members of the African cast stepped off the plane donning Basotho hats, which were hardly regular attire for Johannesburg’s show business community.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, the press projected an image of *King Kong*, “the first all-black show to come over from South Africa,”<sup>90</sup> that featured a cast “none of whom had been out of Africa before”<sup>91</sup> and thus formed “just about the most uninhibited crowd of show business folk ever to pay their visit to England.”<sup>92</sup> Attracted by the storyline of an African musical defying such “odds” as the curfew, threatening Johannesburg hooligan gangs, and the rules of apartheid,<sup>93</sup> the media applauded the efforts of the cast while depicted their arrival in London as the “start [to] the adventure of their lives.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 69.

<sup>88</sup> C.V. Curtis, “Shape of Shows to Come,” *Courier* (London), February 1961.

<sup>89</sup> Ramsden Greig, “The King Kong Show Cast Fly In,” *Evening Standard* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>90</sup> Fay Smith, “A Wind of Change From the Wings,” *The Tatler* (London), Feb. 8, 1961.

<sup>91</sup> Barry Norman, “King Kong cast is warned: Don’t talk politics,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 29, 1961.

<sup>92</sup> G.F.P., “Africans Come to Town,” *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* (Bradford), Feb. 11, 1961..

<sup>93</sup> “Cry, the Beloved Country,” *Time Magazine*, March 03, 1961, obtained from *Time*’s webpage: [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html) (accessed on May 19, 2007).

<sup>94</sup> “The King Kong Cuties,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 8, 1961.



The play's unique background story of an all-African musical coming to the UK combined with Hylton's own prominence in show business fascinated many within Britain and brought much positive press to the musical nearly a month before its premiere. Many within the press actively began rooting for the musical to succeed. A *Sunday Telegraph* story encouraged readers that the visit for the cast "represents an almost miraculous escape from the fearful rigours of South African apartheid" and essentially pleaded with readers to enjoy the musical, stating:

This is why it would be so tragic if *King Kong* flopped, and the cast were forced to go back to the Union within a few short weeks. An impresario cannot be expected to finance a show, if it loses money, out of the generosity of his heart. If as many people try to see Mr. Nathan Mdllele and his cast as try to see the Springboks. Mr. Hylton's conscience will not be tested.<sup>95</sup>

This goodwill initiated predictions of success for the musical before it was ever staged for the British public or critics. Nearly a month before the release of the *King Kong* LP in Britain, one *Daily Mail* reporter proclaimed, "I suspect that his songs like *Quickly in Love* and *Sad Times, Bad Times* will follow *Oliver!* on to the hit parade."<sup>96</sup> After only hearing "one chorus of a traditional song," a writer for the *Oxford Mail* predicted that the play itself "will make a stunning impact through its dynamic music and zestful cast."<sup>97</sup> Another predicted days before the play's actual debut that *King Kong* "may well turn out to be the musical event of the year."<sup>98</sup>

While being careful to temper the press's expectations, most participants deeply believed that *King Kong* would find success on the West End. The African Music and

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<sup>95</sup> "King Kong," *Sunday Telegraph* (London), February 5, 1961.

<sup>96</sup> "The King Kong Cuties," *Daily Mail* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>97</sup> Molly Hobman, "Czech Mates," *Oxford Mail* (Oxford), February 11, 1961.

<sup>98</sup> Benny Green, "The All-African Jazz Musical," *Record and Show Mirror* (London), February 18, 1961.

Drama Trust reportedly anticipated the musical's tour of Britain raising "a capital sum of £50,000."<sup>99</sup> In addition to forecasts of financial success, many within the cast, orchestra and production team sought to successfully use *King Kong* as a statement of African modernity and thereby counter stereotypes of Africans as savage, backward or uncivilized. "Don't think," Gluckman informed *Record and Show Mirror*, "that these people are just going to do a few tribal dances, or that they are semi-savages. They are highly cultured people with a tremendous flair for projecting their personalities across the footlights."<sup>100</sup> "I hope to show you too," Matshikiza told a reporter for London's *Daily Mail*, "that a black composer in South Africa can rise above tribal drums and tom toms."<sup>101</sup> Not everyone apparently possessed such confidence, as Mogotsi remembers almost immediately after their arrival many cast members "began to imagine being sent back to South Africa after only one show."<sup>102</sup>

Due to the high standards of theatre on the West End, the expectations and tastes these audiences were far higher than South Africans. These patrons and critics expected a polished, professional production that could stand up to the other productions on the West End. *Kong*'s amateurish nature could not be accepted and would not hold up to London's standards. Any sloppy acting, singing, dancing, directing or choreographing would be highlighted and criticized, often in comparison to other West End productions. Unfortunately for the production, the company was composed of sixty-plus African

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<sup>99</sup> Untitled article, *Queen* (London), February 15, 1961.

<sup>100</sup> Benny Green, "The All-African Jazz Musical," *Record and Show Mirror* (London), February 18, 1961.

<sup>101</sup> "The King Kong Cuties," *Daily Mail* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>102</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 71.

performers who possessed talent but lacked the polish and technical training of their British and American competition.<sup>103</sup> Matshikiza himself most likely recognized this dilemma when he witnessed that Makeba had grown a great deal as an artist during just a few months of Harry Belafonte's tutoring, and he claimed in his October 1960 *Drum* column, "I can tell you she has improved tremendously, greatly. You can see the polish of London and New York in every way she speaks, moves, acts, looks, and sings."<sup>104</sup> Matshikiza's observation is telling, in that it implies that musicians and singers in London and New York possessed much more "polish" than even the best South African performers. Thus in comparison to the visiting American and domestic British performers, the Kongers with their lack of formal training presumably sounded and acted amateurish.

In hopes of tempering expectations from London theatre critics by positioning the play as an amateur production, Bloom and company hyped the inexperience of all parties involved with *Kong*. In the foreword to the *King Kong* book, Bloom describes the cast members as "novice actors," while he depicts the play's conceptual team as "amateurs"<sup>105</sup> and notes that "[w]ith the exception of Gluckman, we [the *KK* conceptual team and organizers] were all totally inexperienced for the job we had undertaken; none of us know

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<sup>103</sup> It does appear that Gluckman, Bernhardt, and the USAA sought to address such concerns in 1960 when they launched a South African version of *Emperor Jones* that featured an all-African cast and included many of the principals in *King Kong*.

<sup>104</sup> Todd Matshikiza, "With the Lid Off," *Drum* (Johannesburg), October 1960, republished in Matshikiza and Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off*, 78.

<sup>105</sup> Bloom, "Foreword" in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 17.

how to put a musical together.”<sup>106</sup> “I had no experience of theatre before *King Kong*. I am a lawyer, it was a series of coincidences that drew me into the world of African music,” he writes of himself. <sup>107</sup> Rather than hyping Matshikiza’s experience as a literary and musical artist, Bloom points out that Matshikiza was “a razor-blade salesman who travelled the townships.”<sup>108</sup>

He took a similar approach to the African cast. Though he informs the British public that many cast members “were experienced as concert singers,” he adds that “only three had ever acted before, and then in a single small-scale production some months earlier. It would be true to say that the great majority of the cast of *King Kong* had never seen a play or been inside a proper theatre in their lives.”<sup>109</sup> Bloom describes the actor playing “Jack” Stephen Moloi, as “an X-ray technician.”<sup>110</sup> He neglects, however, to point out that Moloi appeared in Lionel Rogosin’s *Come Back, Africa*, a film that British audiences may have been familiar with due to its clips being presented on national television, its acclaim at the Venice Film Festival in 1960, and whose filmmaker possessed a notable following in artistic film circles. Regarding the addition of the new “road-gang scene,” Bloom claims that the production team was startled by “how rapidly and easily the scene took shape,” which he credits to the fact that “practically all the actors in it had done pick-and-shovel labour at some time in their lives.”<sup>111</sup> Such

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<sup>106</sup> Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 14.

<sup>107</sup> Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 9.

<sup>108</sup> Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 14.

<sup>109</sup> Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 15.

<sup>110</sup> Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 18.

<sup>111</sup> Bloom, “Foreword” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 16.

statements served to present the musical as an amateur production, and presumably were aimed to lessen expectations of West End audiences.

Bloom also takes further liberties as he understates the African participants' grasp of the English language. "Then there was the problem of language. Actors were expected to play in what was, to them, virtually a foreign language," Bloom states, "for few could speak English well enough for dramatic purposes, and even the best spoke it with the characteristic African accent."<sup>112</sup> While their diction and pronunciation presumably were problematic, this statement goes beyond the bounds of the truth as many within the cast had received missionary schooling, while other groups that made up the principals, such as the Manhattan Brothers and the Skylarks, routinely sang tunes in English, and yet others, such as "Gwigwi" Mrwebi, were expected to speak significant amounts of English for their primary employment (Mrwebi worked on both *Drum* and later the USAA), or that the show's African composer was on the verge of publishing his own autobiography written entirely in English. This approach seems designed to remind British audiences of the thick South African accents that these performers would possess, and thus may be a sign that the speech classes that the Kongers had gone through in the preparation for the West End had not been entirely effective.

After weeks of "strenuous dress rehearsals," *King Kong* opened to a special "first night" gala on February 22, 1961, that featured Princess Margaret and her husband.<sup>113</sup> Her attendance was celebrated, well-hyped and well-covered by the British media, further

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<sup>112</sup> Bloom, "Foreword" in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (book), 15.

<sup>113</sup> Schedule of Arrangements for Princess Margaret's Visit, 95.2.4.5.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown; and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 72.

providing additional exposure to the musical. The Hylton-led *Kong* production honored these guests in typical royal style, with even the Matshikiza children presenting her with flowers.<sup>114</sup> During the interval, a handful of the *Kong* management crew mingled with the royal guests at a reception that featured drinks and “smoked salmon and chicken sandwiches” and Mdledle, Phango, Mogotsi, Moloi and Gluckman met privately with her highness.<sup>115</sup> Following the performance, she met with the rest of the production team and cast, who presented her with a “Love Letter” (beaded necklace traditionally given by African girls to their boyfriends) and her husband with an *mbira* (a traditional Southern African instrument often referred to a “thumb piano”).<sup>116</sup> The entire ceremony seemed to signal the successful arrival of this “all-African musical.”

Beyond the presence of British royalty, the premiere was also attended by the South African High Commissioner, the Austrian Ambassador to Britain, the Federation High Commissioner for Nigeria, numerous officials for the Ghanaian government, actress Dame Peggy Ashcroft, anti-apartheid activist and Anglican priest Canon John Collins, Lady Dorothy Macmillan (wife of Britain’s Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan), Sir John Balfour, writer Marghanita Laski, actor Bernard Miles, politician/publisher Mark Bonham Carter, the Bishop of Kensington, and the Duke and Duchess of Rutland in

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<sup>114</sup> Schedule of Arrangements for Princess Margaret’s Visit, 95.2.4.5.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>115</sup> Schedule of Arrangements for Princess Margaret’s Visit, 95.2.4.5.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>116</sup> Rosemary McLellan, “The VIP Piccaninny,” *Daily Sketch* (London), February 23, 1961; and “—And at the big African first night—”, *Daily Mail* (London), February 23, 1961.

addition to a host of other notable socialites and celebrities.<sup>117</sup> The attendance of such an impressive list of dignitaries, government officials and celebrities further confirms the excitement and seeming importance of *King Kong* within 1961 London.

The fact that this crowd reacted warmly to the play hinted at success. “I never expected to see the Earl of Harewood, opera authority and cultural director of the Edinburgh Festival, giving a handclap beat to a penny whistler,” remarked a flabbergasted correspondent for Johannesburg’s *Star*, “But that is what he was doing last night...”<sup>118</sup> Most reports of the “First Night” claim that the audience loved the production evidenced by the *Rand Daily Mail* claiming that they received “six curtain calls to loud applause—and there could have been more.”<sup>119</sup> Everything for this gala premiere signaled a strong run for this imported production.

Following its opening night, Edric and Pearl Connor, managers of London’s only talent agency that represented “Afro / Asian / Caribbean” performers and had helped secure housing for *Kong*’s black cast, hosted “an incredible celebration” for the play’s performers, production team, notables within British popular culture, and various

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<sup>117</sup> “King Kong Gets Off to Great Start,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 24, 1961; John Moynihan, “Those stage ‘junkies’ forget the boos –and celebrate,” *Evening Standard* (London), February 23, 1961; and Violet Johnstone, “Mrs. ‘King Kong’ Makes a Happy Home in London,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), February 22, 1961.

<sup>118</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ first-nighters take up Lemmy’s beat,” *The Star* (London), exact date not determined but written in February 1961.

<sup>119</sup> “King Kong Gets Off to Great Start,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), February 24, 1961; Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ first-nighters take up Lemmy’s beat,” *The Star* (London), exact date not determined but written in February; Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 73; and Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

“supporters of the African Music and Drama Association.”<sup>120</sup> *King Kong* appeared destined to succeed on the West End. Riding the wave of warm audience reactions (Mogotsi claims that British audiences “loved it”<sup>121</sup>) and good press (with presumably more on the way, as the BBC was airing “a sound portrait” of Matshikiza the day after *Kong*’s premiere), it looked that the musical was on its way to recreating the success that it received across South Africa two years prior.<sup>122</sup> “*King Kong*’s fame and promise were bringing cheer,” Stein sums up the impact of *Kong*’s arrival on the growing number of relocated or exiled South Africans already based in Britain by 1961, “bathing us all in the spotlight and brightening our lives. Now that the show had opened in Shaftesbury Avenue, thought the optimists in the company, money and fame for each performer was surely guaranteed for ever. Let us celebrate immediately—and forever!”<sup>123</sup> All seemed to be going well for the musical, and all that was needed were positive reviews from the press who possessed, in the words of Mogotsi, “the power to make or break the show.”<sup>124</sup>

### **Critiquing *King Kong***

Without box office figures, it is difficult to tell if early audiences truly enjoyed the musical. It does appear that the musical drew sizeable crowds throughout the early weeks of performances, as roughly £2,500 had been “raised for the African Music Drama

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<sup>120</sup> Edric Connor, had possibly befriended some cast members during his time in South Africa for the filming of Zoltan Korda’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* and possibly had connections to Lionel Ngakane, a South African actor, already in London. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 69-72.

<sup>121</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133 and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 72.

<sup>122</sup> Untitled article, *Oldham Evening Chronicle* (Oldham), February 21, 1961.

<sup>123</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 209.

<sup>124</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 72.



Trust” after two weeks of its West End run,<sup>125</sup> and Goldreich reportedly disclosed to Johannesburg’s *The Star* within a few days after its West End debut, “our conservative estimate is that the show will run for nine months, but theatre people reckon it will last a year.”<sup>126</sup>

Unfortunately, the preliminary hype surrounding *King Kong* grew so large that the British audience possessed over-inflated expectations for the production. “Built up in advance to the stature of its legendary hero,” remarks a *London American* writer, “KING KONG is an almost inevitable disappointment.”<sup>127</sup> The *Daily Mail* ran a mixed review and declared, “King Kong is O.K. But it’s no K.O. It wins on points.”<sup>128</sup> Sold repeatedly over weeks as “a professional triumph” in the defiance of apartheid policies and a unique musical that depicted African life in South Africa, the critics expected much more from the production.<sup>129</sup>

Despite the best efforts of Hylton and the company to present the musical as an amateur production (and thus warn critics), British reviewers regularly lambasted the production. Though it did receive some praise (one review informed readers, “It is a radiant, glowing show and if you miss it you’ll be sorry”),<sup>130</sup> the majority of reviews exposed numerous flaws within the play and deemed the overall production

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<sup>125</sup> “King Kong’s £2,500,” *Daily Herald* (London), March 1, 1961.

<sup>126</sup> “‘King Kong’ cast prefer to be with South Africans,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), March 1, 1961.

<sup>127</sup> “King Kong,” *London American* (London), March 2, 1961.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Muller, “It’s the chorus that conquers King Kong,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>129</sup> “The King Kong Cuties,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>130</sup> F.G., “King Kong a Hit,” *Jewish Chronicle* (London), March 3, 1961.

underwhelming.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, they described it as “a plodding vehicle, which rarely surges with the necessary vitality,”<sup>132</sup> found it “waterlogged and one feels it could have a potential if explored,”<sup>133</sup> felt the “narration is often choppy,”<sup>134</sup> and depicted it as a production “jerk[ing] along without even the charm of a amateur pageant.”<sup>135</sup>

Since the British public knew relatively little about the careers of these African performers prior to the arrival of *King Kong*, they accepted and occasionally celebrated the ostensibly amateur status of the performers that was emphasized by the production team. Failing to question the validity of these claims, British press undersold the fame of the African performers before *Kong*, as *Plays & Players* claimed that “the actors found themselves celebrities” back in South Africa due to their involvement with the musical.<sup>136</sup> Such comments indicate that the production team succeeded in positioning the group as amateurs within the play’s program, book, and press coverage. In actuality, many within the *King Kong* cast and orchestra were the most accomplished performers in Johannesburg, had been performing for decades and were extremely well-known across South Africa before 1959, all of which was largely overlooked by both the press and the public.

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<sup>131</sup> “It’s O.K. but not K.O.,” *Star* (Johannesburg), no date provided in Leon Gluckman’s press clippings.

<sup>132</sup> “King Kong,” *London American* (London), March 2, 1961.

<sup>133</sup> N.D., “‘King Kong’ Acclaimed,” *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), February 27, 1961.

<sup>134</sup> Robert Muller, “It’s the chorus that conquers King Kong,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>135</sup> Don Wedge, “Chorus is star,” *New Musical Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>136</sup> “Dame Peggy Enthuses,” *Plays and Players* (London), March 1961.

Critics and the press too latched onto this theme and hyped the amateurs within the cast. One critic notes, “The all-African cast were mainly amateurs—domestic servants, clerks, teachers and messengers... Peggy Phango was telling me, for instance, that she trained to be a nurse.”<sup>137</sup> Thus the cacophony proclaiming this supposed amateurism drowned out the fact that the Manhattan Brothers, the Woody Woodpeckers, the Skylarks, Gwigwi Mrwebi, Kippie Moeketsi, Sol Klaaste and others had been performing professionally, often across Southern Africa, for over a decade and were established performers within black South African society.

The perceived amateur nature of the performers led many critics to attack the stars’ singing ability. A *Jewish Chronicle* reviewer remarked that “[n]one of the principals has much of a voice.”<sup>138</sup> While it may be true that these performers did not sing well and appeared slapdash on stage, it does seem doubtful that their dancing and singing skills were sub-par since many within the cast went onto to notable music careers in South Africa, Britain and the United States following the musical. Instead it seems more likely that either these performers could not adjust to the size of the Prince’s Theatre (and thus their voices could not carry far enough to reach many audience members) or that these reviewers internalized these claims of the amateurish nature of the performers and arrived to the theatre already condemning them as not up to the standards of the West End. Had they been informed of the backgrounds of the cast, perhaps they would have been received the musical in a far different manner.

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<sup>137</sup> “Dame Peggy Enthuses,” *Plays and Players* (London), March 1961.

<sup>138</sup> F.G., “King Kong a Hit,” *Jewish Chronicle* (London), March 3, 1961.

Aside from the talent of the African performers, many critics failed to follow the storyline due to the thick accents of the performers. Thus the fears about British audiences not fully understanding black South African accents and slang, which drove the producers to include a glossary in the program, proved warranted. One *Times* reviewer asserted, “the [township] flavour [in the dialogue] is strong enough to make some crucial passages difficult to understand.”<sup>139</sup>

Beyond the actual comprehension of the words being said on stage, it also seems that there were certain points in the musical that were lost in cultural, rather than literal, translation. This cultural disconnect most notably surfaced in moments within the production that South African audience members laugh at while British audiences did not (one particular line that fell flat was when one character remarks, “More people go to jail than school in this place”).<sup>140</sup> Hence it appears that British audiences simply did not possess the cultural context to fully understand *King Kong*.

With this point made, part of the difficulties concerning the British audience understanding and hearing the performers may also be due to “the theatre [being] far too big and barn-like.”<sup>141</sup> Thus it may be that these actors, who had only begun performing in such a sizeable venue when they arrived in early February, simply were not prepared to have their voices carry out into such a theatre with a much larger audience. This inability

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<sup>139</sup> “Rhythm, Vitality and Rare Virtue,” *Times* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>140</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ first-nighters take up Lemmy’s beat,” *The Star*, exact date not provided within Leon Gluckman’s press clippings but written in February.

<sup>141</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

of the principles to literally reach may also be why many of the large chorus numbers were better received than solo songs.<sup>142</sup>

Beyond sound and diction, the musical faced other more pressing concerns according to critics. As opposed to back in South Africa where it was the only musical of its kind ever performed in the country as of February 1959, the play faced competition from musicals like *West Side Story*, *Oliver!* and *Flower Drum Song*, which *King Kong* was actually patterned after.<sup>143</sup> Though one reporter for *The Star* told his readers back in Johannesburg that it had “no need to fear comparison with them” (since *King Kong* was “like nothing in London today”), these claims proved false.<sup>144</sup> Instead audiences naturally compared it to thoroughly-polished American musicals, particularly to that of *Carmen Jones*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *West Side Story*, musicals which *King Kong* was modeled after (and intended as a South African version of such).

These productions were on a higher level professionally than *King Kong*, which Gluckman himself admitted as early as 1959.<sup>145</sup> Though some involved in the production believe that *King Kong* did not suffer from such polished competition,<sup>146</sup> it does appear that comparisons to American musicals proved disastrous to *King Kong*’s reception on

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<sup>142</sup> Don Wedge, “Chorus is star,” *New Musical Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>143</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 71-3; Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ first-nighters take up Lemmy’s beat,” *The Star*, exact date not provided by Gluckman press clippings except that it was written in February; and “Leon Gluckman” in Sachs, *South African Personalities and Place*, 153.

<sup>144</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ first-nighters take up Lemmy’s beat,” *The Star*, exact date not determined but written in February, LG Press clippings, NELM.

<sup>145</sup> “Leon Gluckman” in Sachs, *South African Personalities and Places*, 153.

<sup>146</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 71.

the West End.<sup>147</sup> Reviewers disparagingly described it as “a sort of paraphrase of *Carmen*,”<sup>148</sup> “[a] sort of South African ‘West Side Story,’”<sup>149</sup> “a kind of muted version of ‘Carmen Jones’,”<sup>150</sup> and “all very reminiscent of Carmen Jones.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore in comparison to such shows or, for that matter, “[b]y West End standards,” the jazz opera was “not world shattering.”<sup>152</sup> Another review warned readers that *King Kong* “will seriously disappoint only those who expected a new *Porgy and Bess*.”<sup>153</sup> Another review claimed, “were it from Pittsburg and not Johannesburg, it would go the way of the flop.”<sup>154</sup> Others contended that *Kong* simply needed “American professionalism,”<sup>155</sup> as it “lacked the genius of a Gershwin who could combine the simple beauty of the traditional with a subtle ‘classic’ technique and make it into an integrated work of art.”<sup>156</sup>

For many critics and audience members, *King Kong* was not “African” enough because it seemed too “American” and had taken “on a Hollywood ring.”<sup>157</sup> “At times it looked and sounded as though the acting area were suddenly clogged with groups of Louis Armstrongs and Bessie Smiths grown young. One kept looking for what lay

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<sup>147</sup> Sensing these shortcomings, Gluckman even admitted in 1959 that such productions were on a different level than his own production. See “Leon Gluckman” in Sachs, *South African Personalities and Place*, 153.

<sup>148</sup> Robert Muller, “It’s the chorus that conquers King Kong,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>149</sup> Fay Smith, “A Wind of Change From the Wings,” *The Tatler* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>150</sup> N.D., “‘King Kong’ Acclaimed,” *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), February 27, 1961.

<sup>151</sup> J.O., “Black and white and all so human,” *Hampstead Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>152</sup> J.O., “Black and white and all so human,” *Hampstead Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>153</sup> Untitled article, *What’s On in London* (London), March 3, 1961, Leon Gluckman’s press clipping collection does not provide the title of this article.

<sup>154</sup> H.A.L. Craig, “Coming of Cowboy,” *New Statesman* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>155</sup> “Rhythm, Vitality and Rare Virtue,” *Times* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>156</sup> C.H., “King Kong Needs a Gershwin,” *Catholic Herald* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>157</sup> N.D., “‘King Kong’ Acclaimed,” *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), February 27, 1961.

beneath the colour, movement and sunlit voices,” claimed one critic, “for to create these things with supple ease is second nature to the African and to be expected.”<sup>158</sup>

Interestingly, these critiques echo similar criticism that faced an African American musical comedy, *In Dahomey*, sixty years prior, as British music scholar Catherine Parsonage claims that audiences found the play, in her words, “overly American” rather than “an attempt to delineate a more genuine African-American experience.”<sup>159</sup>

Regardless of whether it reflected African popular culture in Johannesburg, the play suffered because British audiences did not want to watch a South African edition of what they believed was an American style; instead they desired what they considered authentically African, which was the stereotypical depiction of Africans as wild savages that British populations had been exposed to for centuries.

The very same year of *King Kong*’s staging on the West End, pre-eminent black philosopher Franz Fanon released *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the work Fanon argues, “[t]he colonialist specialists do not recognize these new [cultural] forms and rush to the help of the traditions of the indigenous society. It is the colonialist who become the defenders of the native style.”<sup>160</sup> His observation holds true through the reviews and reception of *King Kong*. *King Kong*’s staging in London, the metropole of Britain’s colonial and neocolonial empires, naturally drew out reactions that were tainted by the colonial mindset and the colonial view of what exactly is African culture.

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<sup>158</sup> N.D., “‘King Kong’ Acclaimed,” *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), February 27, 1961.

<sup>159</sup> Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, 98.

<sup>160</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated and edited by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 242.

By *King Kong*'s staging on the West End, the British population already possessed their own stereotypes of what was African culture and music. By drawing from South African appropriations of American culture, *King Kong* was considered an imposter or phony rather than an expression of Africa. One critic contended:

*King Kong* seems not so much an African musical as an American musical with an African background—after Hawaii and Siam, Johannesburg... But one can't help hoping that African musical comedy will soon move from here to something more individual, something where the glimpses of township life and the remains of tribal dancing are more integral and less like incidents in a travel film.<sup>161</sup>

It was precisely the components that were recognizably African— themes, rhythms, dances and songs—that reviewers gravitated towards and craved. Similarly a reviewer for the *Times* remarked:

The naivety, the rhythm and the vitality have a characteristic colour and manner of their own. They seem to be conditioned by the particular locality to which the characters belong; and it is perfectly easy to take what appear to us as stage clumsinesses in our stride and to yield ourselves up to the rhythm and the vitality.

Mostly the dances are frankly erotic, with the dancers using their hips and legs, or they are war dances with the gangsters seeking to strike terror with their foot movements...<sup>162</sup>

These components of *Kong* that were recognizably African were highly popular. In this regard, Hylton and Gluckman's collective decision to include more pennywhistle numbers and a gum-boot dance proved correct, as these performances were often the most applauded by audiences and heralded by critics.<sup>163</sup> Teenage pennywhistler Lemmy Mabaso's performances particularly faced widespread applause and adulation, which frequently appeared throughout the reviews in the press. The *Jewish Chronicle* described

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<sup>161</sup> Bamber Gascoigne, "One Trick Too Many," *Spectator* (London), date not provided in Leon Gluckman press clippings.

<sup>162</sup> H.A.L. Craig, "Coming of Cowboy," *New Statesman* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>163</sup> F.G., "King Kong a Hit," *Jewish Chronicle* (London), March 3, 1961.



him as “a ragged 14-year-old urchin obviously destined to be another Louis Armstrong. He enchanted the entire house.”<sup>164</sup>

Those reviewers who did appreciate the musical found enjoyment in what they believed were representative images and sounds from traditional Africa. “What lifts it to an exhilarating show is the vitality of the near-tribal dances, the strutting of a bevy of dusky lovelies,” remarked a reviewer for *People*, “and the fascination of the incessant, pounding rhythm.”<sup>165</sup> Voicing similar admiration, the *Catholic Herald* remarked, “It has all the colour of an eastern bazaar. The fervent singing, boisterous gumboot dancers, the lithier movements and hip-wagging, the simple but extraordinary effective use of the penny whistle, the huge employment of the actors themselves reveling in their roles—are all things often lacking in our over-sophisticated western musicals and not to be missed.”<sup>166</sup>

Such sentiment echoes Britain’s earlier fascination with, as literary scholar Bernth Lindfors puts it, “primitives in the raw” when a stereotypically “savage” Zulu dance troupe, “Caffres at Hyde-Park-Corner” enjoyed widespread popularity during its 1853 tour of Europe.<sup>167</sup> Writing about *King Kong* in London, Lindfors describes the production as “like a revival of the ‘Caffres at Hyde-Park-Corner.’”<sup>168</sup> While Lindfors’ characterization of *King Kong* is misguided since the production largely strayed from

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<sup>164</sup> F.G., “King Kong a Hit,” *Jewish Chronicle* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>165</sup> “Oh, That Pounding Rhythm!”, *People* (London), February 26, 1961.

<sup>166</sup> C.H., “King Kong Needs a Gershwin,” *Catholic Herald* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>167</sup> Bernth Lindfors, “Charles Dickens and the Zulus,” in Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 77.

<sup>168</sup> Lindfors, “Charles Dickens and the Zulus,” in Lindfors, ed., *Africans on Stage*, 78.

presenting such stereotypical imagery, he does effectively demonstrate that it was precisely this imagery of “savage” Africa that British audiences desired to see. It is for this reason that South African productions, such as *Wait a Minim!* (1964), *Kwa Zulu* (1975) and *Ipi Tombi* (1975), that enjoyed success in Britain within the next two decades shied away from *King Kong*’s Americanesque musical format. Instead they stressed stereotypical African imagery and sounds that foreign audiences widely recognized as “African” and consequently, such productions faced warmer reactions by British audiences.<sup>169</sup> Rather than fully appeasing the demands of this segment of the population, reviewers needed to project their own stereotypical and inaccurate views about Africa onto *King Kong*, which presumably made the production much less successful than future South African productions that met acclaim and popularity in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s.

While the British press reported (and thus local audiences knew) that the production had been “admittedly glossed up,” it seems that both parties falsely assumed that this polishing consisted of the inclusion of the jazzier musical pieces, rather than the parts where the actual polishing took place or where performances were added specifically for the West End version of the production.<sup>170</sup> One newspaper claimed, “Only occasionally—as in the Gumboot Dance and the Road Song—does the stage throb with life and colour. It is in these moments that we glimpse the show that might have

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<sup>169</sup> Though *Wait a Minim!* featured an all-white cast, much of the content in this production was Europeans performing African music while wearing stereotypically African costumes as well.

<sup>170</sup> “King Kong,” *London American* (London), March 2, 1961.

been.”<sup>171</sup> Such a review implies a false belief that these pieces were more authentically African. Most Brits did not know, however, that the gum-boot performance was an addition added to the show specifically for British audiences. Ironically, if they were looking for aspects of the “authentic” African experience in Johannesburg, then the gum-boot performances were far from it. Created by Zulu laborers on the South African coastline (mainly Durban), it was far from a performance staple on the Reef, and where it was performed on the Reef was in mining compounds rather than in the streets of Orlando or Sophiatown.<sup>172</sup> Thus it was simply out of place in a musical about urban African life in Johannesburg; as Slier admits, “it brought the house down every evening, but, to me, it seemed out of context; it was grandstanding.”<sup>173</sup> Therefore the “authentically” African segments that the British critics desired more of were in reality inauthentic. As a result this jazz musical could not fully appease British audiences because it offered authentically popular music and dance from African society on the Reef rather than what Western audiences believed to be authentic. Describing the reaction of Western audiences, Coplan claims, “[T]he production was also damned, ironically, by white play-goers who expected an ‘African’ (traditional) display, and so were disturbed by its modern, hybrid nature and considered it ‘inauthentic.’”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> “King Kong,” *London American* (London), March 2, 1961.

<sup>172</sup> Veit Erlmann, “‘Horses in the Race Course’: The Domestication of Ingoma Dancing in South Africa, 1929-39,” *Popular Music*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (October 1989): 262.

<sup>173</sup> Slier, “*King Kong* and the Jewish Connection,” in *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Chanukah 2006): 72.

<sup>174</sup> David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa’s Black City Music and Theatre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 216.

Pertaining further to issues of authenticity, contentions surrounding South African versions of jazz music surfaced within newspaper reviews as well. Though conceivably *King Kong* could expect to draw from London's sizeable population of jazz fans, it seems that they too failed to connect with the musical because the music presented was fundamentally different from the popularly accepted British notion of jazz. It appears that the musical's ability to "interweave tribal chants, European liturgical music and 1925 Dixieland stomps" left it in a difficult position with British audiences.<sup>175</sup> Though some applauded its "blending of pounding African rhythms and straight Tin-Pan Alley," it appears that some reviewers found the South African approach to jazz to be misleading or poor.<sup>176</sup> One review flatly remarked, "[I]t's not a jazz opera or even a jazz musical as claimed by the company,"<sup>177</sup> while another described the musical as "bursting with life and seething with native rhythm (which is not the same thing, of course, as jazz)."<sup>178</sup> "It calls itself 'a jazz musical'," stated a *Catholic Herald* writer, "but it is no more than a series of 'pop' numbers interspersed with some strangely moving traditional choruses. Perhaps this is its greatest failing."<sup>179</sup> How exactly to label this unique music was something many critics contended with, and one went as far as to describe Mabaso's

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<sup>175</sup> "Cry, the Beloved Country," *Time Magazine*, March 03, 1961 obtained from *Time's* webpage: [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html) (accessed on May 19, 2007).

<sup>176</sup> Robert Muller, "It's the chorus that conquers King Kong," *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>177</sup> Robert Muller, "It's the chorus that conquers King Kong," *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>178</sup> *What's On in London* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>179</sup> C.H., "King Kong Needs a Gershwin," *Catholic Herald* (London), March 3, 1961.

pennywhistling as “a tattoo of solid rock ‘n’ roll”.<sup>180</sup> While most reviews agreed that music comprised the best part of the musical or even carried the production, critics and audiences alike struggled with it. Despite being labeled as featuring some “certified-hit solos”<sup>181</sup> by a critic for *Time*, most within British society were not as impressed by the music, as Stein documents Todd Matshikiza’s playing of “It’s a Wedding” at a party caused one local musician to describe it as a “bit tumpy.”<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, it appears that the British jazz public failed to latch onto the musical as the historical record reveals little evidence of musicians like Johnny Dankworth coming out in support of the play.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the general negativity from these reviews was that so many within the public and the press openly hoped for this particular musical to succeed. “With a venture like ‘King Kong’ there is a possibility that the British public, knowing the social background to the whole affair, may be inclined to lean over backwards to like the show,” forecasted a correspondent for the *Record and Show Mirror*.<sup>183</sup> Despite this predisposition of goodwill towards the musical, critics regularly disparaged the production. The *New Musical Express* remarked, “‘King Kong’ is the African musical that every critic wants to be a success. This is the first time a whole

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<sup>180</sup> “‘King Kong’ tracks were cut in S. Africa, Bolton Journal Series, February 24, 1961.

<sup>181</sup> “Cry, the Beloved Country,” *Time Magazine*, March 03, 1961, obtained from *Time*’s webpage: [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html) (accessed on May 19, 2007).

<sup>182</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 219.

<sup>183</sup> Benny Green, “The All-African Jazz Musical,” *Record and Show Mirror* (London), February 18, 1961.

production has been exported. Unfortunately, 'King Kong' is not good enough for the occasion."<sup>184</sup>

Meanwhile others attempting to not completely decimate the musical couched critiques of the production while simultaneously stressing any positive aspect of the play that they found. While one review highlighted that it was "an uneven and flimsy production," it also claimed that it offered "spontaneous gaiety and warmth," and emphasized that it "promises well of better things to come from South African theatre."<sup>185</sup> After praising other plays going on in London's West End, another critic described *King Kong* as "something of a disappointment but had tremendous merits and arrived on such a surge of emotional good-will that it would take downright incompetence—which it does not suffer from—to dissipate it."<sup>186</sup> Similarly the *Catholic Herald* argued that the musical "is worth a visit even if one leaves with a sense that one has only seized part of its vitality."<sup>187</sup> A *Times* review went as far to propose that audience members abandon accepted notions of appraising theatre and take *King Kong* "on its own terms" because "it is a show to which strict standards of professional slickness cannot be applied..." "On any other terms there is much fault to be found," the review announced.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Don Wedge, "Chorus is star," *New Musical Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>185</sup> J.O., "Black and white and all so human," *Hampstead Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>186</sup> David Nathan, "AT LAST—the theatre comes to life," *Daily Herald* (London), February 27, 1961.

<sup>187</sup> C.H., "King Kong Needs a Gershwin," *Catholic Herald* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>188</sup> "Rhythm, Vitality and Rare Virtue," *Times* (London), February 24, 1961.

Due to their published reactions and reviews, the opinions of theatre critics and their “terms” as opposed to those of audiences have dominated my analysis. The scant traces of audience reaction to the musical within the historical record do hint that audiences, particularly local actors, better appreciated the musical than newspaper critics.<sup>189</sup> British actor James Mason told a reporter from *The Star*, “It’s a very exciting show. I only hope the critics treat it right. We love it.”<sup>190</sup> Reflecting similar concerns, Arthur Maimane, a black South African writer then residing in London, claims that after performances the cast regularly “was besieged by admirers of all colours who enthusiastically invited them to parties.”<sup>191</sup>

Within the play’s reviews, there are further hints that audiences may have enjoyed the production far more than the critics, and the *Jewish Chronicle* emphasized, “the [*King Kong*] team took fewer curtain calls than we were prepared to give.”<sup>192</sup> Seemingly echoing this sentiment, another reviewer observed that the applause after one performance “even succeeds in the getting the audience, like a thousand drunken sailors, over the footlights.”<sup>193</sup> So, while such reactions intimate that audiences actually enjoyed the play far more than critics, it also appears that most critics chose to ignore the reaction of the audience or assume that audience members shared their distaste for the production. “At the final curtain, when they reprise the main numbers, and even set the audience to

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<sup>189</sup> “Dame Peggy Enthuses, *Plays and Players* (London), March 1961.

<sup>190</sup> Oliver Walker, “‘King Kong’ first-nighters take up Lemmy’s beat,” *The Star* (Johannesburg) exact date not provided but written in February.

<sup>191</sup> Arthur Maimane, *One of US, Really... (the chronicles of a black writer and journalist in a white world)*, unpublished Manuscript, MCH308, Mayibuye Archives, University of Western Cape, p. 19.

<sup>192</sup> F.G., “King Kong a Hit,” *Jewish Chronicle* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>193</sup> H.A.L. Craig, “Coming of Cowboy,” *New Statesman* (London), March 3, 1961.

rhythmic clapping,” notes a writer for the *London American*, “they manage to overcome a great deal of our pent-up disappointment.”<sup>194</sup>

With this point made—the shorter than expected six-month run on the West End and assumed influence of theatre critics—it does seem that audiences’ enthusiasm for the production did eventually wane. “The public loved it, but only until September,” adds Tucker.<sup>195</sup> In sum, the play, its cast and its organizers failed to live up to expectations and tailed off into obscurity.

### **The Politics of Being Apolitical**

The British populace and press took much interest in this all-African production early on. The cast’s arrival was well covered by the press, who greeted them with headlines that read “Hylton Brings An All-Black Show From The Land of Whites-Only.”<sup>196</sup> As visible black South African figures, the press immediately latched onto the cast and questioned them about the “true” situation for Africans under apartheid from the onset of their arrival in Britain. Even moments after debarking from the plane, the cast was bombarded by the press about life under apartheid. Matshikiza, who had relocated with his family to London in 1960, struggled so profoundly with the questions from the British press about apartheid and life in South Africa that he inquired with various people

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<sup>194</sup> “King Kong,” *London American* (London), March 2, 1961.

<sup>195</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

<sup>196</sup> “The King Kong Cuties,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 8, 1961.



within British show business to assess “how do I handle the Press in this country in such a way that it is not detrimental to the others back home?”<sup>197</sup>

By the time of the rest of the production’s arrival, the African participants had been briefed by the company, according to Mogotsi, on how “to be careful and watch our words so not to upset the applecart.”<sup>198</sup> These briefings are presumably why cast members rarely said anything beyond “this show has helped ease the situation between Black and White” to the press throughout 1961.<sup>199</sup> Realizing any embarrassing behavior could jeopardize the show or cause the apartheid state to revoke their passports, the company even formed an elected disciplinary committee, composed of the elders within the cast, whose job it was to insure that the African cast abided by the set curfew and remained well-behaved offstage.<sup>200</sup>

Audiences and critics in Britain, with their different orientations towards apartheid, reacted much differently than those back in South Africa. While some in the British press marveled at the near miracle of receiving passports for seventy plus non-whites and others became intrigued by the play’s presentation of black South African life,<sup>201</sup> many critics and audience members were thoroughly disappointed by *King Kong*’s seemingly apologetic portrayal of African life under apartheid. While this apolitical

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<sup>197</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 44.

<sup>198</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 71.

<sup>199</sup> Ramsden Greig, “The King Kong Show Cast Fly In,” *Evening Standard* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>200</sup> “All Quiet in West London,” *Sunday Telegraph* (London), February 26, 1961.

<sup>201</sup> For scholar Ulf Hannerz, his viewing of *King Kong* inspired a fascination with Sophiatown that ultimately spurred his own research. See Ulf Hannerz, “Sophiatown: The View from Afar,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 20, Number 2 (June 1994): 181 and 184.

depiction may have been overlooked by the British populace earlier in the twentieth century, views of apartheid throughout the world, and particularly in Britain, had shifted remarkably by 1961. The United Nations by then had deemed the apartheid state as a “threat to world peace,” and Albert Luthuli, then President General of the ANC, received the Nobel Peace Prize later that year in December.<sup>202</sup>

For much of its history, South Africa possessed a significant connection to and affable relationship with Britain. Following the Anglo-Boer Wars (1895-1902), the two nations maintained strong economic, political, social, cultural and military ties as well as a shared mutual interest in suppressing African resistance towards white rule (whether British or South African) across the continent. The relationship between the two nations, however, soured with the rise of the Nationalist Party in 1948, who increasingly sought to extricate the nation from the British Empire. By the dawn of the 1960s, historians Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw argue, the increase in South Africa-related topics being addressed by both the British parliament and the nation’s press indicate that “British public interest in South Africa grew substantially in 1959 and 1960.”<sup>203</sup>

This interest was related to the British public’s disdain towards South Africa, which directly corresponded to Britain’s stance towards its own colonization of Africa. The British Empire across sub-Saharan Africa was undergoing the process of decolonization. On February 3, 1960, British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan’s

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<sup>202</sup> Soon after formal sanctions and arms embargos had begun to be enforced. See Trevor Huddleston, *Return to South Africa: The Ecstasy and the Agony* (London: Fount, 1991), 15.

<sup>203</sup> Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 317.

“Winds of Change” speech informed the South African Parliament in Cape Town that the world must accept that the “growth of national consciousness [across Africa] is a political fact.”<sup>204</sup> While infuriating the South African government, the truth behind MacMillan’s words was evidenced by the fact that former British colonies Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria and Sierra Leone achieved independence between 1957 and 1961 as well as by the rise in independence movements in its remaining colonies across the continent. Furthermore, protests against colonial rule were taking place with a significant frequency in London during 1961 (the most notable being a protest of roughly 4,000 people in response to the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba on February 19, 1961).<sup>205</sup>

Specifically regarding South Africa, the British populace’s view of apartheid became further marred by news reports and photographic images from the Sharpeville Shootings in March 1960, where apartheid security forces fired on unarmed Africans demonstrating against the nation’s pass laws (arguably partially spurred on by MacMillan’s speech nearly a month prior). The carnage from the event left nearly seventy Africans dead and over 150 injured. Hyam and Henshaw describe Sharpeville as “an event that crytallised the general British dislike of apartheid” and seared “into the British public imagination the link between apartheid and brutal state repression.”<sup>206</sup> After Sharpeville, Britain’s view of the apartheid regime was forever tarnished.

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<sup>204</sup> “Souvenir of visit of The Rt. Hon. Harold MacMillan, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to the Houses of Parliament, Cape Town,” February 3, 1960, p. 8, PREM 11/4937, Public Records Office, Kew, Great Britain obtained through Empire Online service (<http://www.empire.amdigital.co.uk>) (Accessed on February 14, 2009).

<sup>205</sup> Summary of these demonstrations obtained at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/19/newsid\\_2748000/2748931.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/19/newsid_2748000/2748931.stm) (Accessed on March 1, 2009).

<sup>206</sup> Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok*, 317.

Furthermore, tensions erupted within the Commonwealth nations over how to address South Africa, which an increasingly number of its members (particularly the recently admitted African member-nations) voicing sentiments to eject the apartheid state out of the Commonwealth all-together. After declaring itself a republic, South Africa refused to compromise on its apartheid policies despite pressure from the Commonwealth, which caused Prime Minister Verwoerd formally to withdraw South Africa from the Commonwealth on May 31, 1961.<sup>207</sup> This maneuver served to further soil the British public's view of the apartheid state as well as to heighten anti-apartheid sentiment across the nation.

Seeking to take the lead in global anti-apartheid activism, British mainstream politics rapidly distanced itself from South Africa and its racial policies,<sup>208</sup> and Hyam and Henshaw argue that by 1960 “apartheid was condemned more vigorously and widely than ever before.”<sup>209</sup> Amazingly, both the British Right and Left were largely unified at this point in their condemnation of the apartheid state (albeit for different reasons, with the Left angered by apartheid's repressive tactics and racist policies while the Right became angered by the anti-British sentiment and actions put forth by the Nationalist Party).<sup>210</sup>

These emotions bolstered enthusiasm for grassroots movements within Britain like the Boycott Movement (founded in 1959 and later renamed the anti-apartheid

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<sup>207</sup>For a more in-depth account of South Africa's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth, see Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok*, 264-270.

<sup>208</sup> George McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 169.

<sup>209</sup> Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok*, 319.

<sup>210</sup> For more on how the British reacted to South Africa during this period, see Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok*, 314-21.

movement) spearheaded by Father Trevor Huddleston and Cannon John Collins.<sup>211</sup> Due to a combination of all these listed factors, the anti-apartheid movement drew upon members of “the New Left, radical Christians, African activists and exiles, and a coalition of culturalists.”<sup>212</sup> The impact of such groups became increasingly evident on British television and with society itself. Matshikiza, himself, remembers witnessing anti-apartheid protests on May 31, 1960 that featured a strong, enthusiastic crowd bearing “banners [that] bore the names of all those ‘MUST GO.’”<sup>213</sup> It was in this post-Sharpeville climate that *King Kong* arrived in London where interest in South Africa and sympathy towards the nation’s black population were piqued, and thus presumably presented a favorable performing environment for *King Kong*.

Unfortunately for the musical, that was not the case. As early as the production’s debut in late February 1961, the British public widely desired to learn more about apartheid’s injustices and, in particular, hear the viewpoints of the nation’s indigenous African popular. Therefore it became widely assumed that *King Kong* and its African participants (arguably the most well-known black South Africans in London during the spring of 1961) would speak out against apartheid. It was this atmosphere that *King Kong* entered, and one writer for the *Eastern Daily Press* notes:

It is heartening that so many people are sufficiently moved by the affairs of Africa to come out and shout. But an event is about to take place in London which may have a deeper effect on our attitude to one African problem, apartheid, than all the demonstrators who stand up—and occasionally lie down—for the African cause. This is the negro musical show from South Africa...

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<sup>211</sup> Soon after formal sanctions and arms embargos had begun to be enforced. See Huddleston, *Return to South Africa*, 15.

<sup>212</sup> McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 169-70.

<sup>213</sup> Todd Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 59.

Few shows have made public interest burn so fiercely before opening night as this jazz opera based on the life and death of King Kong, the Zulu boxer. His story is a readymade tragedy of apartheid which is on its way to acquiring the force of a myth.<sup>214</sup>

Instead of appeasing this growing interest in South Africa and the anti-apartheid struggle, *King Kong* offered little to no critique about apartheid laws and instead featured happy Africans dancing and singing, which essentially ran counter to what the British public had been inundated with since 1948 (and particularly after Sharpeville).

Rather than riding this momentum and condemning the apartheid state, Hylton and the production team openly thanked and praised it for its cooperation in making “it possible for our total company of more than 60 to get passports.”<sup>215</sup> In the play’s program, Hylton even states that he “has received every courtesy and co-operation from the Union government and wishes to record his appreciation.”<sup>216</sup> “Our company was astounded by the enthusiasm and reception of white audiences. A great deal of good has been done by the Government’s sensible and open-handed attitude in making it possible for us to come to London,” Gluckman added when addressing the press.<sup>217</sup>

While assuring the media that the play possessed “criticism,” Gluckman and the company further emphasized that the play “has no political point of view” and “there has been no attempt at censorship.”<sup>218</sup> To many in England who were increasingly becoming

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<sup>214</sup> “Jazz and Banners,” *Eastern Daily Press* (Norwich), February 20, 1961.

<sup>215</sup> “African Musical ‘Helps Race Relations’,” *Birmingham Post* (Birmingham), February 6, 1961.

<sup>216</sup> *King Kong: A Jazz Musical* (program for London performances), author’s collection, 9.

<sup>217</sup> “African Musical ‘Helps Race Relations’,” *Birmingham Post* (Birmingham), February 6, 1961; “A passport to fame for King Kong,” *Daily Mail* (London), February 6, 1961; and “Show from Africa ‘aids racial amity’,” *Nottingham Guardian Journal* (Nottingham), February 6, 1961.

<sup>218</sup> “African Musical ‘Helps Race Relations’,” *Birmingham Post* (Birmingham), February 6, 1961.

aware of apartheid's evils, such sentiment became considered, as Coplan puts it in *In Township Tonight!*, "simply an advertisement for the social status quo."<sup>219</sup> While none within the organizational team apparently recognized this conflict, some fans back in South Africa did, as an editorial in Johannesburg's *Sunday Times* even joked, "if any members of the King Kong cast decide to leave the stage, they could profitably be taken into the diplomatic service."<sup>220</sup>

Despite the best efforts of the production and those involved with it to avoid politics altogether, the issue of politics followed the musical through its reviews.<sup>221</sup> Most critics felt cheated by the musical's inability to deliver any such critiques after so much hype within the media. Knowing little about the play's actual content beforehand, they simply presumed that an "all-African musical" would voice concerns of South Africa's black population, whose mistreatment at the hands of the apartheid state had increasingly been disseminated to the British public. One *Daily Mail* critic who enjoyed the show scathingly wrote:

[O]ne's enthusiasm might be more unbounded had not the entire show been so over-exuberantly oversold in advance—particularly by the Establishment.

One now realises why our betters could afford to oversell it. Politically, King Kong is about as dynamic as a bag of laundry.

Everything, including the gangsterism and the social misery, has been agreeably prettied. The only political lesson we learn is that the Africans are humans beings [*sic*] and, no doubt, to some this will be a most disturbing revelation.

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<sup>219</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (2008), 216.

<sup>220</sup> "People Say...", *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), February 12, 1961.

<sup>221</sup> Rumors even surfaced claiming the African cast was approached by the Committee of African Organizations to participate in their demonstrations, which some in Britain believed was masterminded by the Kremlin. See Douglas Clark, "Agitator!" *Daily Express* (London), February 20, 1961; and Peter Stewart and James Reid, "Scotland Yard Hunt Spy Radio in London Flat," *Sunday Dispatch* (London), February 26, 1961.

But South Africa House can keep calm. We are told nothing about Johannesburg life that is likely to rouse us to anger. We are just being entertained by a slick, American-type song-and-dance musical.<sup>222</sup>

This sort of anger against the South African government resurfaced throughout the press, and the apolitical *King Kong* production surfaced as a target of criticism and anti-apartheid sentiment.

Connected to the production's lack of political bite, rumors circulated throughout London that the South African government had threatened to revoke the casts' passports and recall the production altogether if any cast members embarrassed the state by misbehaving or openly condemning apartheid. These rumors became so widespread that Gluckman felt the need to tell one critic:

No directive of any sort was issued by the South African government as to good behaviour.

Talk of the members of the company losing their passports if, by some unfortunate mischance there should be any trouble, just is not true. These passports have been given for one year and there has been no threat of any kind to revoke them.<sup>223</sup>

Despite denials like the one above, some in the press openly speculated that the play had been influenced by the apartheid state, which they believed explained why the show was lacking in biting criticisms of the government. The *Catholic Herald* expounded, "'King Kong' has the makings of a musical with everything, but it somehow falls short of expectations. Its humour is pathetically naïve, the jibe at apartheid mere gentle cajoling.

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<sup>222</sup> Robert Muller, "It's the chorus that conquers King Kong," *Daily Mail* (London), February 24, 1961.

<sup>223</sup> "Dame Peggy Enthuses," *Plays and Players* (London), March 1961.



How much of this is due to the Africans' simplemindedness and how much to the white censor, is difficult to tell."<sup>224</sup>

Regardless of its intent, the play lacked any significant critique of the South African government and thus by default it depicted the apartheid nation in a positive or, at worst, neutral light, which only some in the press appreciated. *The Tatler*, a magazine that traditionally served the British upper-classes, remarked that the musical could offer a different point of view:

It would be unrealistic to read into it a political change of heart [by the apartheid state]; but it does suggest a consciousness of public relations overseas. And indeed *King Kong* will show a side of life in South Africa far different from that suggested by newspaper sensationalism. Continually to describe the new republic—and Johannesburg in particular—as 'unhappy' and 'tragic' is to distort the truth, presenting only one facet—though admittedly a real one.<sup>225</sup>

Most critics, however, were not willing to accept *King Kong*'s "real" presentation of African life in Johannesburg.

While some members of the press and audiences accepted that "[p]olitics are left completely in the cold, the only message being that men and women, black and white, are all human," most simply could not.<sup>226</sup> Not fully comprehending the difficulties encountered by the company in order to actually stage the musical in Britain, most reviewers expecting biting condemnations inevitably left disappointed. One critic stated, "[a] loathing for apartheid or even a distaste for South African sherry (there is a full-page advertisement for it in the programme) led many people to hope for some implicit

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<sup>224</sup> C.H., "King Kong Needs a Gershwin," *Catholic Herald* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>225</sup> Fay Smith, "A Wind of Change From the Wings," *The Tatler* (London), February 8, 1961.

<sup>226</sup> J.O., "Black and white and all so human," *Hampstead Express* (London), March 3, 1961.

comment on the black man's burden. There was none."<sup>227</sup> Such sentiments demonstrate how most in Britain did not understand that the inclusion of such "loathing" would have doomed the musical during its initial run in South Africa and possibly would have shut down the show altogether, as Coplan claims, "the show would never have been granted wide public exposure in South Africa if the system had been frontally attacked."<sup>228</sup>

One critique of apartheid that *King Kong* did profess was that Ezekiel "King Kong" Dlamini was prevented from becoming, in the words of Bloom, "the champion he wanted to be... [because] there was never a chance to match himself against white boxers, all of whom he was confident of beating."<sup>229</sup> Thus Bloom implies that the apartheid state's policy banning interracial boxing matches doomed this would-be champion. Though this particular point remained true, Bloom neglects to point out, as demonstrated in chapter one, that Dlamini probably was not a world-class boxer and probably could have fought abroad if he indeed was one. Regardless, Bloom actively sought to convince audiences that "the story of an African struggling by brute strength to burst out of the limitations of his segregated life must sure show" that the play "is no apology for apartheid."<sup>230</sup>

Desperately wanting some sort of political critique, a few reviewers latched onto to such hidden or unstated anti-apartheid messages and wove these into their viewings and reviews of the musical, such as a *Daily Herald* writer who stated "for all its gaiety

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<sup>227</sup> H.A.L. Craig, "Coming of Cowboy," *New Statesman* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>228</sup> Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* (2008), 216.

<sup>229</sup> Bloom, "Foreword," in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera*, 13.

<sup>230</sup> Bloom, "Foreword," in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera*, 17.

and vitality, it is the evil of apartheid that is the real reason for the downfall of King Kong himself.”<sup>231</sup> Describing the play as “an important skirmish in the war on apartheid,” another reviewer perceived the play’s greater impact on South African society and continued by stating, “It is very like the Irish National Theatre of 60 years ago; it asserts national culture; it a demonstration of independent spirit; such springs may run to great rivers.”<sup>232</sup>

*King Kong*’s “capturing a happy optimistic spirit,” as Bloom claims,<sup>233</sup> severely irked many audience members and critics alike, and those who expected, as one review noted, “a blasting indictment of *apartheid*, which is touched upon only implicitly” were inevitably disappointed.<sup>234</sup> Beyond disappointing such critics, the lack of political content in such a depiction of the harsh conditions for Africans under apartheid—or any biting criticism of the apartheid state, for that matter—angered many patrons and potential public backers of the play. “Now I can understand why the South African Government allowed this show and gave it a passport to come to Britain,” Anglican priest and anti-apartheid activist (as well as organizer of the 1957 jazz concert previously mentioned) Canon Collins told the media. “It doesn’t give a full picture of South Africa at all. It gives the impression that the African is something different from the normal human being. There is far too much fun and games. I am sure it shows a true picture—

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<sup>231</sup> David Nathan, “AT LAST—the theatre comes to life,” *Daily Herald* (London), February 27, 1961.

<sup>232</sup> H.A.L. Craig, “Coming of Cowboy,” *New Statesman* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>233</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera*, 16-7.

<sup>234</sup> *What’s On in London* (London), March 3, 1961, Leon Gluckman’s press clipping collection does not provide the title of this article.

but only of one side.”<sup>235</sup> For a member of the public so sympathetic to the African cause in South Africa, Collins’ remarks proved particularly embarrassing.

Though some critics jokingly mocked Collins’s critiques (one reviewer countered, “What does he (Collins) expect for his money? Sharpeville?”), many voiced similar concerns.<sup>236</sup> One *Kensington News* correspondent questioned the authenticity of the play’s depiction of black life under apartheid: “In the shack land they may call beer ‘brown champagne’ but living conditions there are surely not as happy as depicted in this naive, lively musical.”<sup>237</sup> Thus it seems that because the British public associated South Africa with oppression and racism, many within the populace could not accept the fact that there was joy, fun, music and dancing under apartheid.<sup>238</sup>

A key reason for *King Kong*’s success across South Africa in 1959 was its ability to be simultaneously political and apolitical. The play’s lack of any pointed remarks against apartheid or criticism of the government permitted the apartheid state to allow *King Kong* to be staged, while also not alienating white audiences, and even made it a palatable production for virtually all segments of South Africa’s European population. Despite its lack of politics, politically inclined audiences sympathetic to or actively involved with the anti-apartheid struggle, such as non-white populations and white

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<sup>235</sup> John Moynihan, “Those stage ‘junkies’ forget the boos –and celebrate,” *Evening Standard* (London), February 23, 1961; John Dean Potter, “Enough of the ‘school dress’ squabbles!”, *Sunday Dispatch* (London), February 26, 1961; and “More Misery Please,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), February 26, 1961.

<sup>236</sup> John Dean Potter, “Enough of the ‘school dress’ squabbles!”, *Sunday Dispatch* (London), February 26, 1961.

<sup>237</sup> A.T., “A Black Mark for Naivety,” *Kensington News* (London), March 3, 1961.

<sup>238</sup> Interestingly, however, these standards do not appear to be applied to African American and black British populations still being oppressed and discriminated against in their respective countries in 1961.

radicals, found just its historic nature and the multiracial efforts behind *King Kong*'s making to be enough of a political statement. Summarizing these feelings, Lewis Nkosi, black South African author and former *Drum* journalist, notes in his 1961, *Home and Exile*:

The somewhat tepid reception given to the musical on its London opening night contrasted curiously with the harsh convivial atmosphere of the Johannesburg opening night, for the resounding welcome accorded the musical at the University Great Hall that night was not so much for the jazz opera as a finished artistic product as it was applause for an Idea which had been achieved by pooling together resources from both black and white artists in the face of impossible odds. For so long black and white artists had worked in watertight compartments, in complete isolation, with very little contact or cross-fertilisation of ideas. Johannesburg seemed at the time to be on the verge of creating a new and exciting Bohemia.<sup>239</sup>

It was this idea of a South Africa beyond apartheid where black and white could work together as equals and peers that enticed many black and white South Africans to applaud and cherish the musical. Thus it was this ability to appease multiple segments of the South African populace that positioned *King Kong* to succeed within that country. In Britain, this approach alienated many segments of the public that potentially would support an “all-African musical.”

Though Bloom and others involved in the production contended that the South African townships possessed “a feeling of youthful strength and courage, of communal warmheartedness and laughter, of *indestructibility*,” it seems that this particular segment of British audiences simply discarded the musical as toothless propaganda sent abroad by the apartheid state.<sup>240</sup> This concern that “[*King Kong*] does not hit out at the racial

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<sup>239</sup> Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), 24.

<sup>240</sup> Bloom, “Foreword,” in *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera*, 17.

policies of the South African Government” caused Bloom to write a piece addressing these beliefs in *The Sunday Times* where he stated:

This view has come as a surprise to those of us who helped to bring the show to life in South Africa. We always felt that the play had a message of some importance in the fight for sane race relations. True, the message is not stated in the usual language of political protest—the blunt angry attack on race laws and discrimination. We felt that this would have been out of place in a musical. Besides, we wanted to say something new, and important, about the African and his life in the segregated townships. And we tried to say it in a language free from propaganda, through the charm and grace of the characters, through satire rather than protest, and by means of vivid music, dance, and spectacle.<sup>241</sup>

He claimed that *KK* “rammed a hole through the wall of apartheid in a most effective and unexpected manner.”<sup>242</sup>

In addition to the views of the production team, the African members of the cast and orchestra too sensed similar feelings regarding the political importance of staging *King Kong* through the lens of the anti-apartheid struggle within South Africa. Thus many felt that the play’s staging in London was another major victory against the apartheid state in the struggle for racial equality. This sentiment was best captured when the performers were accompanied by “[o]ur people [who] were proud to be there to see us off” to Johannesburg’s Jan Smuts Airport prior to debarking for Britain.<sup>243</sup> At the airport, the crowd burst into an impromptu performance of “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrica,” which had for all intents and purposes emerged as the unofficial national anthem for South Africa’s African population by 1961.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, the achievement of *King Kong* was embraced by African political leadership, and, according to Esmé Matshikiza,

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<sup>241</sup> Harry Bloom, “A break in the race barrier,” *The Sunday Times* (London), March 5, 1961.

<sup>242</sup> Harry Bloom, “A break in the race barrier,” *The Sunday Times* (London), March 5, 1961.

<sup>243</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 69.

<sup>244</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

Mandela specifically took time out of an illegal political mission to London in order to visit with Todd Matshikiza.<sup>245</sup>

Unfortunately for the production, British critics and audiences alike did not possess a background regarding life under apartheid necessary to accept notions of *King Kong*'s indirect political importance. Those involved with the musical could not make any more outwardly anti-apartheid statements to the British press, as they could not risk offending the apartheid state who could conceivably deny any applications to extend the African cast's passports or revoke them all together at any moment. If they did act on their beliefs, they risked being sent home or causing the entire production to close down all-together. As a result, the production found the momentum and positive press that it previously had basked in sapped. These biting criticisms concerning its apolitical content, in addition to the negative reviews concerning the play itself, were simply too much for the musical to overcome, and the production struggled on the West End for the next months.<sup>246</sup>

### **(Potentially) Coming to America and the Demise of a Musical**

After nearly six months of, at best, meager box office figures, Hylton attempted to salvage the show by touring it throughout Britain's outlying cities like Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham, until he could ascertain if *King Kong* would be

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<sup>245</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview, in Mac Maharaj and Ahmed Kathrada, eds., *Mandela: the Authorised Portrait* (Highlands North: Wild Dog Press, 2006), 106.

<sup>246</sup> These struggles were further compounded if one accepts Mogotsi's contention that "the audiences began to dwindle for many shows in the West End." See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 73.

brought to America or continental Europe.<sup>247</sup> Here it too failed to deliver on the hype that the musical initially enjoyed on its arrival to the UK, and continued to “los[e] money in the provinces.”<sup>248</sup>

Prior to leaving South Africa, the commonly held hope for most involved with the production was that the UK tour would act as a springboard towards an appearance on New York’s Broadway, as rumors of *King Kong* reaching Broadway surfaced in the *New York Times* before the production ever left South Africa for the West End.<sup>249</sup> Such whispers persisted throughout the play’s performances throughout the UK,<sup>250</sup> with excerpts from the musical receiving airplay on at least one American radio station (New York’s 99.5 WBAI-FM) in 1961<sup>251</sup> and its record already impressing African American poet and playwright Langston Hughes.<sup>252</sup> The idea of hitting Broadway is significant, since it epitomized both the dreams and expectations of those involved in *Kong*, as the musical’s concept, score, organization and choreography were based largely on American theatre and jazz music. Virtually every African member of the production dreamt of reaching America due to their own appropriations of American culture.

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<sup>247</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 73.

<sup>248</sup> “Bookings Ran Out for ‘King Kong’,” *The Times* (London), December 5, 1961.

<sup>249</sup> Leonard Ingalls, “African Musical Sets London Trip,” *New York Times* (New York), January 5, 1961.

<sup>250</sup> “Cry, the Beloved Country,” *Time Magazine*, March 03, 1961 obtained from *Time*’s webpage: [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,897695,00.html) (accessed on May 19, 2007).

<sup>251</sup> “Radio,” *New York Times* (New York), November 6, 1961.

<sup>252</sup> Letter to Sylvia M. Titus from Langston Hughes, March 21, 1960, 1 and Letter to Langston Hughes from Sylvia Titus, April 6, 1960, 2, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



While the production never made it to the American stage, the historical record does indicate that Hylton initially planned to take *King Kong* on a tour of Israel, continental Europe and America following the UK performances, as *The Times* of London reports in 1961 that Hylton “acquired the world rights of the books, [and] still hopes that the cast may be reassembled to visit Israel next March and for the show to have a run on Broadway in September, 1962.”<sup>253</sup> While it is unclear how definitive such plans were, New York-based promoter Kermit Bloomgarden (with partners David Merrick and Joseph Kipness) did meet with Hylton where the two reportedly struck “[v]erbal arrangements” from which a plan was enacted that Bloomgarden would return to London on March 5 in order to take in one performance of the show and decide whether or not sign the deal.<sup>254</sup>

While the particulars pertaining to any proposed performances on Broadway remain relatively unclear, discussions did take place between *King Kong*’s organizers and the apartheid state. In late August, representing the USAA, Bernhardt requested “an extension of at least one year to the passports... [because the company] are due to open in New York in February, 1962.”<sup>255</sup> Nearly three weeks later, Hugh Charles on behalf of the Hylton organization, wrote to Mr. T.I. Steenkamp, Third Secretary, South Africa House in London to inform the South African government that the play was proposing

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<sup>253</sup> “Bookings Ran Out for ‘King Kong’,” *The Times* (London), December 5, 1961.

<sup>254</sup> Sam Zolotow, “‘King Kong’ Eyed By Bloomgarden,” *New York Times* (New York) February 21, 1961.

<sup>255</sup> Letter from Ian. E. Bernhardt, Manager of USAA, to Mr. Scholtemeyer, the Secretary for the Interior (Pretoria), August 20, 1961 in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.

“to do a short tour of the Continent prior to taking the production to New York, U.S.A.”<sup>256</sup> which prompted the South African Embassy to inform officials back in South Africa that “[a]s timeous [*sic*] application must be made for visas for the United States of America, an early decision would be appreciated.”<sup>257</sup> Perhaps once again a testament to the apolitical nature of the play, behavior of the cast, and seemingly positive press that it received from the initial granting of the passports to Britain, the apartheid state was indeed willing to extend these passports and allow the troupe to perform in the United States.<sup>258</sup>

One interesting caveat of this rumor that resurfaced repeatedly was that Makeba would rejoin production as “Joyce” and Harry Belafonte (who was then-mentoring and performing with Makeba) would replace Mdllele as “King Kong.” Already a celebrated duet by 1962, their involvement could have potentially lent significant credibility and star power to a production based largely around an unrecognizable and seemingly amateur cast,<sup>259</sup> and thus caused the production to avoid many of the criticisms lobbed by British

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<sup>256</sup> Letter entitled “King Kong” from Hugh Charles to Mr. T.I. Steenkamp, Third Secretary, South Africa House (London), September 12, 1961 in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.

<sup>257</sup> Letter entitled “Renewal and Endorsements of Passports: Fifty-Seven Bantu Members of Cast of Musical Production ‘King Kong’” from W.H. Martin for Acting Administrative Secretary of the South African Embassy to the Secretary for the Interior (Pretoria), September 27, 1961 in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.

<sup>258</sup> Letter (possible telegram) from Acting Secretary for the Interior to unnamed recipient in London, dated November 17, 1961 reads, “Your 28/5761 Passports King Kong Cast May Be Renewed Until 31/3/62 Repeat 31/3/62 And May Be Endorsed As Requested” in “Passpoorte King Kong Geselskap” File, C100/6/2406, National Archives Repository, Pretoria.

<sup>259</sup> “Lusakhula Namanje Udumo Luka Miriam-Makeba,” *Bona* (Zulu edition), July 1961.

critics.<sup>260</sup> In the end, any negotiations to get Belafonte or even Makeba involved in any international performances either never got going or deteriorated.<sup>261</sup>

Despite these tentative plans, and having secured the permission from the apartheid state, the proposed *King Kong* tour to America fell through, which appears directly due to the lackluster response by British audiences and critics. This lost chance at staging *King Kong* was, as Tucker describes, “a major disappointment to all concerned.”<sup>262</sup> This development meant not only that *King Kong*’s run was over but also that the popularly held fantasy of heading to America was crushed as well. The cast took this news particularly hard, and Mogotsi admits, “[w]e had hoped the States would have been a possibility and were really downhearted when that did not work out.”<sup>263</sup> Stein details how Bloom was emotionally destroyed by *Kong*’s failure to make it to Broadway and states, “[o]ne night he was at the show, sitting in the royal box with George Merrick the renowned US producer [and associate of Bloomgarden], talking over a six-figure deal for Broadway, yet a few months later, the show closed down, the cast dispersed, Merrick on to the next sensational discovery, he was a complete down and out, he’d crumbled.”<sup>264</sup> Rather than an overwhelming victory, *King Kong*’s run abroad ended in bitter defeat.

Stein continues:

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<sup>260</sup> It remains unclear how Belafonte would have fared with the South African lingo and Bantu languages (though he and Makeba did sing together in various South African languages) or how Mdladle would have handled the demotion or where he would feature in a Broadway-bound version.

<sup>261</sup> The failure to secure Makeba or Belafonte conceivably could have halted the proposed plan of bringing the production to Broadway.

<sup>262</sup> Tucker, *Just the Ticket*, 133.

<sup>263</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 74.

<sup>264</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 244.

*King Kong* seemed to have proven an uncanny literary litmus test for success and happiness. Those who were members of the company and who had originally thought themselves so lucky to be part of it, turned the litmus paper blue, an extremely chilly blue—which meant they were to suffer in their future careers. Whereas for those outside it a rosier hue came up, and for them the path to prosperity was unobstructed.

You could attribute the especial depression of the *King Kong* people in the following few years to the dashing of expectations—they were one moment the favoured ones seemingly bound for the top, and the next sprawled at the bottom. This was worse than if good fortune had never beckoned at all.”<sup>265</sup>

## Conclusion

Failing to recreate the rampant success that the musical enjoyed in South Africa and continuing on with the tentatively scheduled tour of Europe and North America, the 1961 *King Kong* tour of Britain folded with dim results. By failing to meet these expectations, the tour must be considered an underwhelming or, at best, mild success. Whereas the musical succeeded in appeasing the wants and needs of diverse aspects of the South African populace, the same cannot be said in Britain. UK audiences were fundamentally different than South African ones, and therefore possessed different needs and wants from this all-African musical, which the production failed to provide. Despite the massive promotional hype and apparent desire by many within Britain for the play to succeed, in addition to Hylton’s own reputation as a producer of popular British theatre, it simply could not translate this goodwill into actual success. Despite its own flaws in presentation, it does appear that even a play of the highest quality would have been unable to appease British audience. This public desired a production condemning apartheid that simultaneously presented stereotypical imagery of Africans being tribal savages, both which presumably either would have run counter to one another or been a near impossible line to toe.

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<sup>265</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 244.

## Chapter Four

### **“Sad Times, Bad Times”: Issues of Exile, the *King Kong* Cast, and South African Jazz in Britain, 1960-1980**

Following *King Kong*'s tour of Britain, the production's cast and band members faced the choice of returning to the politically oppressive South Africa or enjoying the liberty of life abroad but forgoing the chance to return home.<sup>1</sup> As part of the agreement in securing passports to go to London in 1960, the *KK* members were bound, in the words of Leon Gluckman, “by virtue of an understanding... [and] officially committed to return.”<sup>2</sup> If they chose to remain abroad, then they risked having to remain there for an indefinite period of time. The lure of successful careers abroad, raising their children in better schools and enjoying the freedom available to them in the outside world forced most to, at least, consider the option.<sup>3</sup> Though most of sixty plus members chose to go back to South Africa, eighteen remained in Britain and lived most of their lives away from their homeland.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I realize that this section on the returning cast members is rather brief. Since the focus of this chapter is on the experience on life in exile, I have chosen to neglect discussing those that returned to South Africa. I plan on expanding my analysis on them into a full-length chapter when this dissertation is remade into a full-length monograph.

<sup>2</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 2 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the performers that returned to South Africa, such as Thandi Klaasen, Abigail Khubheka and Sophie Mgcina, would go on to have successful careers back home with numerous opportunities to work and travel abroad. Others, like General Duze, Kippie Moeketsi and Mackay Davashe, would face inconsistent careers and fade from the spotlight as time went on.

<sup>4</sup> Gluckman and the press reports indicate that this number was eighteen but Joe Mogotsi lists twenty members of the cast that chose to remain in exile (and leaves off Alton Kumalo and Gwigwi Mrwebi). See Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown; and Joe Mogotsi with Pearl Connor,

Though scholars have examined the issue of exile within South African history, these studies tend to focus on political actors and organizations abroad as well as the anti-apartheid struggle in general. Those who have examined the experience of South African artists often do so in a cursory manner. By focusing on the collective experience of the African members of *King Kong* cast and orchestra, this section provides a more thorough view of the collective experience of the South African musician in exile. This particular chapter explores the challenges and difficulties faced by the *King Kong* exiles in Britain. It demonstrates how these performers regularly struggled with finding work, continuing their careers, and providing for their families while trying to fit into a foreign society.

I have chosen to term “Kongers,” because the beginning of these performers performing careers abroad can largely be traced back to the exposure and connections gained from their involvement in *King Kong*. Mogotsi refers to *King Kong* as “the key that had opened the door to our entrance into the western world.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, since many of the British Kongers forged, at best, marginal careers within entertainment, my sources of many within the group remain rather limited. As a result, this chapter attempts to tell the larger story of these performers in exile through the experiences of those about whose lives I have been able to find documentation.<sup>6</sup>

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Mantindane, “*He Who Survives*”: *My Life with The Manhattan Brothers*, Copenhagen: The Booktrader, 2002), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Upon completing this dissertation, I will make a research to Britain where I hope to fill some of these gaps.

## Preconceived Notions of Exile and Life Abroad

Many within *King Kong* possessed dreams of escaping apartheid and making it on the international music scene long before their involvement with this “jazz opera.” Sylvester Stein, former editor of *Drum* magazine, intimates that Gwigwi Mrwebi “had been planning to get away abroad” much earlier than his 1961 voyage to London with *King Kong*.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1950s, black performers found their careers hindered by the increasingly meddlesome apartheid regime’s curfew and pass laws. They faced frequent harassment by the apartheid security forces and police, as a result, and this treatment would only deteriorate further after the Sharpeville shootings in 1960 and the growing militancy of opposition movements. Thus by the time of *King Kong*’s London shows, many performers had formulated the notion that virtually anywhere would be better than post-Sharpeville South Africa.

Stein notes being contacted in Britain (circa 1958) by Johnny Dankworth, a prominent British jazz musician, inquiring about a South African trombonist applying for asylum and who apparently named Dankworth and Stein as British citizens who could vouch for him. This trombonist was Cameron ‘Pinocchio’ Mokaleng, a renowned Sophiatown jazz enthusiast and a friend to most of the *King Kong* cast.<sup>8</sup> Pinocchio stowed away on a Britain-bound ship in Cape Town dreaming of a better life in Britain by 1958. Hoping to cash in on his limited connections to Dankworth (who had visited

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<sup>7</sup>Sylvester Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?: A historical Caprice* (London: Corvo, 2003), 185.

<sup>8</sup> Though Mokaleng played the trombone, he was best as the organizer of the well-attended jazz listening sessions at Sophiatown’s Odin Cinema.

South Africa a year or two earlier) and others in Britain, Mokaleng tried his luck abroad.<sup>9</sup> His tumultuous situation notwithstanding, back home *Drum* columnist Can Themba celebrated this achievement by proclaiming Pinocchio “has made it... [and] musical friends there have helped Pinoc[c]hio, and he may now stay, despite his unconventional entry.”<sup>10</sup> While certainly taking an unconventional journey into exile, Mokaleng’s effort demonstrates the feelings of desperation harbored by many within Johannesburg’s artist community, though few would even consider taking his approach to reaching Britain. His act, however, captured the growing sentiment back in South Africa that life could and would be better abroad.

Like “Pinocchio” and the other exiles before them, many Kongers assumed their careers and lives would be improved overseas. Many naively considered a place like London to be “demi-paradise.” Beyond escaping apartheid, most thought that if given the opportunity to live abroad that they would take it, and capitalize on their chance to make it as actors, writers, singers, dancers and musicians on the international stage. Reflecting on his father’s generation’s view on the chance of pursuing careers overseas, John Matshikiza believed that they possessed “a lot of confidence about their abilities to compete in the wider world” and that his own father believed that by “moving into a

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<sup>9</sup> In a place like Johannesburg that relied so heavily on connections, acquaintances, it seems this approach may seemed more logical than it does now.

<sup>10</sup> D. Can Themba, “Pinochio Hits Britain,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), April 1958.



bigger pool where things were freer... he would be able to develop as a composer and as a writer.”<sup>11</sup>

Their initial observations were drawn from the perceived wealth of opportunities within London entertainment. Writing before *King Kong*’s London debut, Matshikiza claims, “[T]here is such a great demand for black South African musicians here that I am sure our guys would walk into jobs blindfolded, straight from the ‘plane. *But you must work hard*, chaps. The money is good, but you must be damn good, too.”<sup>12</sup> Voicing similar beliefs, Joe Mogotsi would later tell Gluckman, “The bread was here, the freedom was here,” and thus he “wanted to stay” abroad.<sup>13</sup> Unbeknownst to many of these migrants, however, life outside apartheid’s reach would not automatically translate to an entry into success, fame and fortune. Instead it would entail heartbreak, homesickness, and hard times.

### **Exile and the South African Community**

Despite the mixed reviews for *King Kong*’s British run in 1961, much was expected for this wave of Kongers remaining in exile. They essentially comprised the best performers that South Africa had to offer, and many simply assumed that they would make it big on international stages. Furthermore, this concept was initially validated by

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<sup>11</sup> John Matshikiza, interview by Hilda Bernstein, MCA 7-1589, Hilda Bernstein Collection, Mayibuye Archives, University of Western Cape.

<sup>12</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “With the Lid Off,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1960, republished in Todd Matshikiza and John Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off: South African Insights from Home and Abroad, 1959-2000* (Johannesburg: M&G Books, 2000), 75.

<sup>13</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

Miriam Makeba's success and acclaim in America.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, however, many exiles never lived up to the expectations set forth by their friends, family, peers, fans and themselves. "[N]ot a lot happened to most of the people involved in King Kong after that [its UK run]," John Matshikiza noted.<sup>15</sup> Stein observes, "[P]rofessional musicians and dancers were hardest hit in this transplantation [into Britain]. I saw them stream in to set up life in Britain, the great stars of Africa, yet hardly any of them found their feet."<sup>16</sup> Most of the Kongers who wound up in Britain faced difficult lives and careers. Some gave up performing altogether. Others continued performing and carved out lackluster careers in music, television, radio and theatre. A number could not cope with their stagnating career or the heartbreak of never returning home, and faded into depression and alcoholism.<sup>17</sup>

By the mid-1950s, a slow trickle of black and white South African athletes, writers, intellectuals, singers, actors, and activists to Britain had already formed. These numbers steadily increased as the 1960s opened, and Stein remembers that "almost the

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<sup>14</sup> Makeba had already moved to America as she was afforded a trip abroad at the premier of *Come Back, Africa* at the Venice Film Festival. Through her trip, she had already secured a partnership with Harry Belafonte and her singing skills were already receiving overwhelming acclaim by American critics and audiences.

<sup>15</sup> John Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein, MCA 7-1589, Hilda Bernstein Collection, Mayibuye Archives, University of Western Cape.

<sup>16</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 188.

<sup>17</sup> In order to tell the story of the Kongers in Britain, I rely heavily on various published interviews, autobiographies of the play's participants and their friends, and a working script of a documentary proposed by Leon Gluckman. The documentary was set to explore, "[w]hat has happened to these people (the Kongers) in the last 8 years? How have they fared as black entertainers in a predominantly white profession?" See script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

whole of our *dramatis personae*” had relocated in London.<sup>18</sup> These men, women, and children arrived in London to escape the constraints (whether professional or political) that came under apartheid. The South African exile community, both white and black, became so large by the 1970s that it was not uncommon for families to host relatives and friends relocating to, studying in or stopping by Britain.<sup>19</sup> Due to their prominence back home and large number, the Kongers formed a significant part of the nucleus of this growing exile community. As relatively minor acts within British society, on the other hand, they were far from the driving forces within this community.

As over a dozen immigrants, the collective impact of the Kongers was immediately felt within British nightlife, and their defection caused Lewis Nkosi to observe in 1966 that they then “form[ed] collectively a veritable ‘verwoerdstan’ in London.”<sup>20</sup> As many of South Africa’s most popular and talented musicians, singers, actors and composers, they made up, in essence, the cream of Johannesburg’s musical crop. Despite the relocations of other prominent South African artists and performers to Europe prior to 1960, such as actor Lionel Ngakane, crooner Sonny Pillay, writer/actor Bloke Modisane, writer Ezekiel Mphahlele and sculptor/painter Gerard Sekoto among others, the en masse defection of the Kongers into exile was a watershed moment as it marked a sudden shift of the place of exile within the lives of South African artists. With so many performers deciding to remain abroad, this collective defection convinced other

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<sup>18</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 175.

<sup>19</sup> Todd Matshikiza’s son would admit that the “large number of South African friends” in London helped him initially stay in London when returned from Zambia in 1974. See John Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Nkosi, “Jazz in Exile,” *Transition*, No. 24 (1966): 34.

artists to choose a similar path. Largely due to their collective defection, the Kongers blazed a new trail for South African artists and Coplan credits the defection of so many from the *King Kong* cast members of fostering an era where South African performers faced “only two choices: fight or flight.”<sup>21</sup> Increasingly, they chose to pursue life in exile, which became in the words of Nkosi, “now an inescapable condition” for artists.<sup>22</sup> Soon after their choice to remain abroad, artists like Abdullah Ibrahim, Bea Benjamin, Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes among others followed suit and it now became common for South African actors, writers, musicians, singers and artists to leave South Africa in order to escape apartheid as well as try their luck abroad.

Beyond their own careers, some Kongers, such as Matshikiza and Mrwebi, chose to remain abroad for the betterment of their families, particularly their children. John Matshikiza told one interviewer, “I think my parents had wished to save their children... from the horrors of Bantu education.”<sup>23</sup> After being established abroad, other Kongers often made attempts to bring their spouses, children and grandchildren to join them.<sup>24</sup> Hence they realized that beyond the possibility of earning more money and gaining better careers abroad that their wives, husbands and children would benefit from life abroad.

Many Kongers considered these opportunities in Britain simply too numerous and promising to pass up, and thus chose to remain abroad out of professional necessity.

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<sup>21</sup> David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*, second edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 229

<sup>22</sup> Lewis Nkosi, “Jazz in Exile,” 34.

<sup>23</sup> John Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein.

<sup>24</sup> Mogotsi attempted to get children and grandchildren to London but often denied, he would succeed in getting his teenaged granddaughter to join in England during the late 1980s. Part of his rationale to get them to Britain was to get them out of “Bantu education.” See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 106-7.

Rather than an artistic oasis, London proved a difficult and stifling place to network as well as assimilate into. This became particularly true as memory of the *King Kong* musical waned. “[My father] found a lot of doors closed to him in a country [Britain] where who you know and what your background is is very important and what your educational certificates say,” John Matshikiza told an interviewer.<sup>25</sup>

The disparity of social settings between Johannesburg and London arose as one key difference. Whereas social circles in Johannesburg were small and relatively close-knit, London’s artistic and musical scenes were fundamentally different. “In London you might go ten years without cannoning into your acquaintances. If you did not cultivate the orderly art of networking you would soon fall out of touch,” Stein claims, “endure a sorry and unfulfilled time and finally disappear, your ashes more than happy to settle for an early scattering.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it appears that Britain’s large South African expatriot communities, despite making up a larger percentage of the national population than in America, could offer little in professional support for singers, actors and musicians.

The management of *King Kong* who had been instrumental in its staging, such as Stanley Glasser, Harry Bloom, Pat Williams, and Leon Gluckman, likewise could not provide much support to the Kongers. Though they often remained close to the performers, they did not possess the clout in Britain to aid in establishing the Kongers. Whereas they were big fish within white music or theatre back in Johannesburg, they

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<sup>25</sup> John Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein.

<sup>26</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 190.

often possessed their own difficulties securing positions abroad. Leon Gluckman, for instance, was a prolific actor in South Africa and possessed experience with the Old Vic, but he was hardly a major figure within British theatre during the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of using his influence to find employment for the Kongers jobs, he also needed to worry about his own career. Though he did attempt to provide opportunity to the Kongers during various projects, such as featuring Makeba in a television series, casting the Manhattan Brothers in the 1965 *Nymphs & Satires* (which he directed), and attempting to make a documentary of the Kongers acclimation to Britain (which surely would have provided all of them with much needed exposure if aired), none of these endeavors were particularly effective in launching any career of the *Kong* cast. Others, like Glasser and Bloom, failed to break into London's cultural scenes but found employment as professors, a profession which does not seem to have lent itself to aiding the cultivation of the Kongers' performance careers.

Upon launching their British careers, the Manhattan Brothers relied on some aid from Jack Hylton as he provided the group with a "free of charge" rehearsal room in hopes of them launching a career in Britain, but it seems that he could not (or was unwilling to) offer much assistance beyond this space.<sup>27</sup> Beyond this instance, the historical record indicates no other instance of Hylton trying to help jumpstart the careers of these exiles. Unlike the American Kongers who relied initially on Harry Belafonte and/or Miriam Makeba to ease them into the American entertainment world, it appears that the British Kongers were afforded no such luxury.

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<sup>27</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 75.

Instead these exiles relied on one another, and this point may explain why many initially worked together and formed groups shortly after the run of *King Kong*, as they needed to band together in order to best pool their talents and resources in hopes of competing within the British music scene. One notices such occurrences with Sol Klaaste becoming the main pianist for the Manhattan Brothers and four female *KK* cast members forming The Velvettes.<sup>28</sup> Such collaborations were logical since these exiles possessed knowledge of each others' songs, routines and talents as well as a healthy knowledge of traditional South African music, which often provided a firm basis of their routines. It must also be noted that partnerships may have also been born out of the fact that many within the *King Kong* cast, including the Velvettes and the Manhattan Brothers, were under the management of a talent agency run by Trinidadian-born singer turned actor Edric Conner (who worked in South Africa with the Zoltan Korda directed film, *Cry, the Beloved Country*) and his wife Pearl, herself a prominent actress from Trinidad (and later wife of Manhattan Brother Joe Mogotsi).<sup>29</sup> It was this connection that placed many Kongers, including Phango, Tommy Buson, Khoza and Mogotsi in a German version of *Porgy and Bess* and later a British version of *Hair*.<sup>30</sup>

These collaborations became more and more fleeting—particularly, as each Konger struggled to maintain one's own careers rather than working to help out another

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<sup>28</sup> Such collaborations may also be due to many of the Kongers sharing the same agents, the Edric and Pearl Connor talent agency. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Bourne, "Connor, Pearl," 114 in David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 90-1.

<sup>30</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 87-88.

performer. This trend took place throughout exile and many groups from the cast, such as the Woodpeckers, the Manhattan Brothers and the Velvettes, broke up by 1970. Often performers needed to secure bookings any way they could, and if one member could not perform, then it appears that they were more likely to drop a band mate than back in South Africa. This was the case when Manhattan Brothers dropped Ronnie Majola from the group because he lacked the ability to quickly memorize or read music (skills needed for employment with the BBC) and the group was forced to replace him with Walter Loate, another former member of the *King Kong* cast.<sup>31</sup> Thus it seems that they were rarely in a position to develop each other's careers. With no Konger in Britain encountering wide success, these alliances never provided the same sort of opportunities facing the American Kongers. Instead of complementing one another, they often ended up as individuals looking out for their own personal interests.

### **King Kongers and African Music in Britain**

As the Kongers primarily identified themselves as musicians or singers, most chose to initially pursue such careers in Britain. The competition for singing and musician jobs was fierce in London, as Matshikiza warns in a 1960 *Drum* column, "[H]ere there're thousands of musicians after each job! ...It is not enough here to be merely a good musician. You must know what music is all about."<sup>32</sup> Throughout this column, on the other hand, Matshikiza is adamant that South African musicians could

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<sup>31</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> Todd Matshikiza, "With the Lid Off," *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1960, republished in Matshikiza and Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off*, 74-5.



easily make it within the British music world. He and his fellow Kongers would test this theory.

Out of all the Kongers heading into exile, the Manhattan Brothers looked to be the most prepared and equipped to translate their success in South Africa to Britain. By featuring the two male leads from *King Kong*, Mogotsi and Mdledle, in their lineup, they presumably were much better known and respected than an obscure performer from the orchestra pit or a dancer with a bit role.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, they had not only been touring Southern Africa since the 1940s but also organized these tours. Thus they presumably were better prepared to book tours, secure gigs and make good on shoestring budgets. Furthermore, their act had been fine tuned over decades of performing, and they (along with their pianist, Klaaste) were incredibly familiar with one another. Lastly, their act presumably did not seem rushed or thrown together, and probably appeared quite professional.

Despite these advantages, virtually every member of the *Kong* cast, including the Manhattan Brothers, struggled within this new performative environment. Unlike their peers in America who performed in top-end nightclubs and venues, the British *Kong* contingent performed in working-class drinking haunts, church halls, American military and even strip clubs.<sup>34</sup> Even the most successful of these performers, such as Manhattan Brothers who toured Israel, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Turkey and Northern Britain,

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<sup>33</sup> This point may not have provide too much of an advantage, however, as the four singers never appeared in *King Kong* as the Manhattan Brothers. The play did not stress the performances of any particular music group, and while British audiences would be much more familiar with the name Joe Mogotsi or Nathan Mdledle than their group.

<sup>34</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown; and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 75, 77-9, 81-2.

often scraped by.<sup>35</sup> Whereas the Manhattan Brothers were the preeminent singing group in 1950s South Africa, the Brothers were obscure, near-unknowns in 1960s Europe. They found somewhat steady employment by scrambling between acting and singing performances, but entertainment was a far more unpredictable profession in Britain than they anticipated in 1961. Their two LPs (released in 1965) received “no returns.”<sup>36</sup> Despite making extensive tours of Europe, they never gained a reputation comparable to their star status back home, and according to Stein, “they achieved no further big hits, no fame, no real public acclaim in all that time.”<sup>37</sup>

Adding to their difficulties, it appears that the Kongers found themselves excluded from British music unions. As foreigners, they threatened the livelihoods of local musicians and thus it seems that the unions kept these South African musicians from joining their rolls. Matshikiza notes, “[T]here are so many excellent musicians looking for jobs that the Musicians’ Union allows only two or three on an exchange basis at a time to come from outside England.”<sup>38</sup> Painting a harsher picture, Mogotsi claims that he and the Manhattan Brothers were barred from joining these groups roughly until the release of Nelson Mandela.<sup>39</sup> Such provincial actions by these unions presumably denied the Kongers access to gigs, recording contracts, and various other professional

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<sup>35</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 75, 77-9, 81-2; and script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>36</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “With the Lid Off,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), September 1960, republished in Matshikiza and Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off*, 74-5.

<sup>39</sup> Mogotsi points out that though he and the Manhattan Brothers applied for membership into London’s Performing Rights Society (PRS) in 1964, they only gained admittance in 1991, a trend he connects with the growing popularity of Nelson Mandela and the ANC. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 105.

opportunities, which thereby retarded their careers since much employment within musical performance went “through the union.”<sup>40</sup>

As many musicians of the era, the Kongers endured their share of shady promoters and frugal club owners. As black foreigners, however, they were even more vulnerable and possibly taken advantage of more often than local performers. Mogotsi claims that white “supporting acts” and “inexperienced newcomers” regularly received higher pay than the featured act, his all-African group.<sup>41</sup> Such abuses served to accentuate increasing tensions between the group’s members, and Mogotsi claims that one such instance (combined with heavy drinking) prompted Mdledle and Klaaste to abandon the group before a Birmingham performance. By 1970, the remaining three members dissolved the group due to various health problems, irritation by the traveling associated with show business, the brutal realization that they would never find fame and fortune, and as they began settling down with their families.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the Manhattan Brothers, the Velvettes were another musical group comprised of the Kongers made up of Peggy Phango, Patience Gcwabe, Hazel Futa and Rose Hlela.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the Manhattan Brothers and the Woody Woodpeckers, the Velvettes were created while in exile as the group did not exist previously. While a rather insignificant group in that they did not release any albums or amass any notable hits, they found a unique niche with 1960s London and performed within Britain’s

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<sup>40</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “With the Lid Off,” *Drum*, September 1960, republished in Matshikiza and Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 83-4, 122.

<sup>43</sup> They later performed as a trio after Phango left the group.

significant R&B music scene. They regularly backed Cyril Davies, a key forefather of the local scene, and his R&B All-Stars. In 1963, *Jazz News* reported, “Peggy Phango and her girls from the *King Kong* cast joined Cyril Davies and his All-Stars in an evening of rhythm-and-blues unsurpassed so far in London.”<sup>44</sup> Together with their regular opening act, The Rollin’ Stones (yes, those Rolling Stones), contributed to the London subculture of which spawned The Yardbirds and The Who as well the Stones.<sup>45</sup> The group, however, did not last long presumably due to limited opportunities or the members starting families.

Groups like the Manhattans, Velvettes and Woodpeckers faced various difficulties following *King Kong*’s dissolution. One particular challenge was to decide what sort of images and sounds they should project in hopes of reaching foreign audiences. As women, the female Kongers who remained in Britain faced a different set of hurdles, and it appears that many relied heavily on good looks and sexy personas to find them gigs early on in exile. Though most possessed backgrounds of beauty queens back in South Africa, none of the female *Kong* exiles in Britain were dominant stars of South African nightlife before the musical. The Velvettes offered pretty faces and attractive bodies in addition to decent singing voices to the Cyril Davies All Stars, and one member of the Davies’ band remarked about the Velvettes, “[T]heir main attraction was bumping and grinding their bottoms at the audience – Hazel, Patience and Mumsy. The clubs up north,

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<sup>44</sup> Unnamed article from *Jazz News*, January 16, 1963 cited from Tony Bacon, *London Live: From the Yardbirds to Pink Floyd to the Sex Pistols: The inside story of live bands in the capital’s trail-blazing music clubs* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1999), 49.

<sup>45</sup> The Rollin’ Stones would only add a “g” to “rollin” later on. See Bacon, *London Live*, 49-50.

or anywhere else, had never seen anything like it.”<sup>46</sup> By the end of the 1960s, they were hardly young women and thus presumably could not rely on their looks for much longer (particularly without much training in music or acting) in a profession that valued youth and beauty as well as talent. Thus it appears that the careers of these women, in general, fell off as these performers aged. As Gluckman remarks, “They were young glamour girls in 1961 but they are not so young any more.”<sup>47</sup>

Other acts, such as the Woody Woodpeckers, chose personas and sounds similar to musical acts already popular in Britain and America. The Woodpeckers, with their already American sounding music, apparently consciously dropped most of the remaining African aspects of routines as Gluckman notes that they became “almost totally Westernized.”<sup>48</sup> While this “more American style act, singing popular soul music” initially provided the group with opportunities in Britain, they failed to develop a distinctive career and they faded into obscurity as the years went on.<sup>49</sup>

Other performers incorporated more British songs and styles in their performances in hopes of appeasing British audiences. Roughly six and a half years after *King Kong*’s UK run, Manhattan Brother Nathan “Dambuza” Mdledle “decided to go it alone.”<sup>50</sup> Once solo Mdledle too dropped much of his African routines from the

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<sup>46</sup> Rick Brown, interview, “Rick Brown’s memories of the Cyril Davies All Stars and more...”, available at <http://www.cyrildavies.com/Rick.html> (accessed on February 20, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>48</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 7 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>49</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 78.

<sup>50</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 9 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

Manhattan Brothers in order to better cater “to the taste of the English public.”<sup>51</sup> His performance of “Up From Somerset,” for example, included him donning a traditionally British outfit of “plus fours, walking stick, [and] cloth cap.”<sup>52</sup> Klaaste similarly experimented with making his act more British by putting Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* to music. Despite these adaptations, both Mdledle and Klaaste struggled, and often only played in pubs in impoverished working-class locales, such as the London borough of Whitechapel or the Northern industrial cities, rather than glamorous West End nightclubs with packed houses.<sup>53</sup>

Before their break up in 1970, the Manhattan Brothers strove to maintain a balance between their American and African sounding songs, which provided them with a great deal of versatility and perhaps aided in their longevity. With songs in English and various Bantu languages, the Manhattan Brothers increased their chances of appealing to European audiences. Mogotsi remarks that they secured gigs on American military bases due to their “authentic rendition[s] of the American [singing] style.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, “[t]heir act has remained essentially African and leans heavily on South African folk music, songs and dances” and thus could provide a routine unique in Europe.<sup>55</sup> As time progressed, it appears that they made further steps to Africanize their performances, as

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<sup>51</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 9 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>52</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 9 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>53</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>54</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

they added the “developments of African songs and dances (e.g. Kilimanjaro and The Gumboot dance).”<sup>56</sup>

Regardless of these implementations and their approach to music production in Britain, the members of *King Kong* in Britain failed to truly crack into mainstream British music circles and the cast’s careers stagnated for much of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>57</sup> It appears quite probable that the Kongers arrived in London in a period unsuitable to their skill-sets and musical styles. Esmé Matshikiza, Todd’s wife, best made this point in an interview about her husband’s career:

His cultural environment [of 1960s Britain] was totally different and foreign to the cultural, musical environment here in Britain – to anything that people understand here [London during the 1990s]. If Todd had lived, he would be far better understood now than he was then. Then the musical world was dominated by people who had never really understood, or tired to take in influences from other people’s music – music from other cultures. Now young people on radio and television are very heavily influenced by the Far East, by India and particularly by Africa in the past few years. They would have understood what Todd was all about. And I think he would have worked in a very much happier cultural environment.<sup>58</sup>

Thus it seems that the British musical scene of the 1960s was not one of interest in music of the “Third World.” Whereas in America where musical interest from the rest of the world was beginning to peak, Britain still possessed a rather closed-minded view of music from other parts of the globe, which directly impeded the careers of the Kongers.

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<sup>56</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>57</sup> The group was later relaunched during the late 1980s as they became increasingly active with anti-apartheid concerts and events.

<sup>58</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 327.

## The Pain of Failure and the Taste of Disappointment

This collective lack of success within British music was particularly painful for many of these performers. One Konger particularly affected negatively by the experience of exile was Nathan “Dambuza” Mdledle. Though he and fellow South African singer Louis Emmanuel often worked together, he was unable to recreate the success and stardom that he received as leader of the Manhattan Brothers or as the lead in *King Kong*. This transition from star to nobody was particularly painful, and Gluckman observes, “the process of adapting to anonymity in England has been very difficult for him.”<sup>59</sup>

Seconding Gluckman’s observation, Mogotsi writes of his former singing partner and *King Kong* co-star:

Nathan had not adapted well to exile. In South Africa he did not drink, but on the road in England and Europe he began to drink, some times quite heavily. He had been used to handling The Manhattan Brothers affairs and he could never quite accept our manager, Pearl, handling all our affairs. He was a proud man and, having been a top performer in South Africa and starred in *King Kong*, he could not accept the drop in status of being a little known jazzman on the club circuit. He had desperately wanted to go to the States, and was embittered when plans fell through.<sup>60</sup>

It seems that this lack of meeting his own expectations of life in exile became a heavy burden for a once much-acclaimed singer.

Like Dambuza, Todd Matshikiza endured similar troubles and suffered from depression and alcoholism. Once widely considered one of the most creative minds in Africa, Matshikiza, a *Drum* music columnist, journalist and noted composer, often only found sporadic part-time work at the BBC or freelance journalism. Though he did

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<sup>59</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 2 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>60</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 81.



publish his now seminal autobiography, *Chocolates for My Wife*, while in Britain, this achievement was the only significant body of writing that he completed after leaving South Africa. Despite drawing the interest and encouragement of many literary figures (including Langston Hughes), Matshikiza's disconnection from his South Africa seemingly stood in the way of his creativity and his musical productivity also curbed as his time in exile became prolonged. By arriving with his family in London months before the musical's cast and band, it appears that Matshikiza began to realize the bleak prospects in London before many of his peers. After *King Kong*'s run, he grew further disenchanted with his professional prospects in Britain. Esmé Matshikiza told one interviewer, "[T]here was nothing [in London] for someone like Todd in a cultural environment where the school or university to which you went determined the type of job you were, or were not, able to do. This was Britain of the 1960s – warm and welcoming and available at one level, totally insular at another. Todd could not adjust to this culture, nor could he be reconciled to exile. His soul started to die then."<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, his career's stagnation spurred his and his family's relocation to Zambia in 1964.<sup>62</sup>

Like Matshikiza and the Manhattan Brothers, exile did not live up to the expectations of "Gwigwi" Mrwebi. Though he had long "been planning to get away abroad" before *Kong*'s Johannesburg premiere, Mrwebi was a grizzled veteran of show business by 1961.<sup>63</sup> Though he raised the needed funds (apparently through both friendly donations and working multiple jobs) for his wife and their two children to join him in

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<sup>61</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 327.

<sup>62</sup> This stage in Matshikiza's life will be addressed further later in chapter five.

<sup>63</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 185.

Britain, his career whilst in Britain was, at best, mixed.<sup>64</sup> He did compose numerous songs but nothing really was deemed a hit (perhaps his most recognized pieces was one composition featured in Leon Gluckman's *Wait A Minim!* revue that performed on both London's West End and New York's Broadway).<sup>65</sup> He also led a band during the mid-to-late 1960s, which included notable South African saxophonist Dudu Pukwana and pianist Chris McGregor, that attempted to bring South Africa's mbqanga music, often composed by either Pukwana or Mrwebi, to international audiences. In doing so, it appears that the group attempted to piggyback on Miriam Makeba's success of performing South African music in America as Chris McGregor noted during one radio broadcast, "Many beautiful mbaqanga songs have been made known to the world at large by the great folk-singer Miriam Makeba but not much of the instrumental mbaqanga music has been heard outside South Africa, so we hope you will enjoy this program of the music of Gwigwi Mrwebi."<sup>66</sup> It does appear, however, that Mrwebi's band did not last long as there exists little more in the historical record about this band.<sup>67</sup> It does appear likely that the band broke up as a result of McGregor and Pukwana collaborating on other projects—The Blue Notes and The Brotherhood of Breath—or due to Mrwebi's poor health as he

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<sup>64</sup> "Treatment" section, p. 6 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>65</sup> Text of radio broadcast for the Transcription Centre written by Chris McGregor, "McGregor, Chris (autobiographical notes)," Transcription Centre Papers, Folder 2.5, Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Text of radio broadcast for the Transcription Centre written by Chris McGregor, "McGregor, Chris (autobiographical notes)," Transcription Centre Papers, Folder 2.5, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Though I acquired *Mbaqanga Songs*, the only album released by Mrwebi while in exile, it arrived too late to be fully incorporated into my analysis. I do plan on adding this material to this section when revising this project for publication.

reportedly endured heart problems for which he “spent some weeks in hospital [by 1970].”<sup>68</sup>

The historical record of Mrwebi’s life past the mid-1960s is far more hidden and dispersed than many of the other Kongers. In his brief bio of Mrwebi, Jurgen Schadeberg writes, “[H]e [Mrwebi] stayed for some years [in Britain], playing his altosax in night clubs and jazz sessions. He also acted in a film and appeared on TV and was known to every club in Soho.”<sup>69</sup> While it remains unclear which film Mrwebi appeared in, he did at least appear (his role was “servant”) in one episode of a British television show, “Theatre 625.”<sup>70</sup> Regardless, such work was sporadic at best, and his life in exile was certainly filled with pain and disappointment. These struggles, however, appear due more or less to his age rather than talent-level. He was much older than many of the *Kong* exiles, and his children were near adults or teenagers when they joined him in exile (one of which moved to America).<sup>71</sup> Apparently his family responsibilities initially blocked his studies at a British music school, and he eventually settled in “as a typesetter in a printing works” (something that his experience as *Drum*’s circulation manager back in Johannesburg surely helped secure).<sup>72</sup> This transition from performer to working-class laborer did not sit well with Mrwebi. “When the day’s work is over,” observes

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<sup>68</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 6 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>69</sup> “Benni Benjo ‘Gwigwiza’ Of Mrwebi, Also Known As Gwigwi,” in Jurgen Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People* (Johannesburg: Bailey’s African Photo Archives, 1987), 193.

<sup>70</sup> “Gwigwi Mrwebi,” Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm3032013/> (Accessed on December 3, 2008).

<sup>71</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>72</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

Gluckman, “he sits in his room and blows his saxophone [*sic*] thinking of the future.... Now he practises by himself at night and waits for his freedom.”<sup>73</sup> As his children got older, he did eventually move to America in order to pursue a proper music education. By that time, however, he was much older than his peers in school, which presumably must have been incredibly frustrating. Additionally, his health further suffered and he died in the early 1970s.

### **Out of Work and Into Acting**

By 1970, few of the cast members remaining in Britain still earned their living primarily through musical performance, which certainly pained many as Klaaste reportedly wondered how they “can stand” giving up careers in music.<sup>74</sup> Many Kongers made a transition from musical to theatrical performer while in exile as a number embarked on acting careers. Though the results were mixed, some did carve out niches as African actors in a predominantly white Britain. While *King Kong* itself faced mixed reviews, it did provide, according to Shirley Cordeaux (a producer with the BBC’s African Service), an “initial stimuli” to African theatre,<sup>75</sup> and the Kongers found niches within African theatre performed in Europe and on the airwaves of sub-Saharan Africa

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<sup>73</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>74</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>75</sup> Shirley Cordeaux, “The BBC African Service’s Involvement in African Theatre,” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1970): 148.

often due to their training and exposure with *King Kong*.<sup>76</sup> These efforts were further facilitated by the fact that the Kongers already possessed memberships with Equity (the British Actor's Union) because of their involvement in *King Kong* and thus presumably already had access to various opportunities in television, cinema and theatre as opposed to being blocked from the opportunities due to their inability to join the musician's union.<sup>77</sup>

The impact of *King Kong* on the British acting worlds (i.e. theatre, radio, cinema and television) is probably where the impact of these exiles was most profound, particularly as the BBC attempted to Africanize their programming.<sup>78</sup> Phango, Mdledle, Futa, Mrwebi, Mogotsi, Kumalo, Matshikiza and others made appearances on British stage, television and radio. Together the *Kong* contingent formed, according to Cordeaux, "a nucleus of semiprofessional African actors and actresses eager to try their hand at any type of dramatic work."<sup>79</sup> One cannot underestimate this point as the number of black actors in Britain was so minute that producers of West Indian playwright Barry Reckford's *Skyvers* in 1963 claimed that they needed an all-white cast because they could

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<sup>76</sup> Mogotsi points out that his director during a production of *Showboat* remembered his *KK* performance. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> As part of the requirement to perform with *King Kong* in London, the cast members of *King Kong* needed to join Equity and thus they could continue membership within the organization if they so desired.

<sup>78</sup> In March 1962, the BBC African Service began its monthly "African Theatre" series. Its broadcasts could be "heard all over Africa," and the service sought to "set itself up as an arbiter of African radio drama" by producing "about a hundred original plays by African authors" within its first eight years. While no Kongers authored any of these plays (the BBC instead employed the emerging African playwrights like Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo and Bloke Modisane), these plays did offer early acting opportunities to these exiles. For more information of this programming, see Cordeaux, "The BBC African Service's Involvement in African Theatre," 147-155.

<sup>79</sup> Cordeaux, "The BBC African Service's Involvement in African Theatre," 148.

not find any black actors suitable for the production.<sup>80</sup> Thus their South African backgrounds proved quite helpful in securing such roles, as directors presumably believed that these actors could provide more authentic “African” feel than British, West Indian or American actors. Writing on the BBC radio dramas, Cordeaux argues, “while our presentation of a Tanzanian play, for example, may not be a hundred percent authentic in accent or ‘feel,’ our standard of radio acting and broadcasting technique may achieve a result nearer the author’s realization of his material.”<sup>81</sup> The *Kong* exiles often aided in this process of providing authenticity or “feel,” and it would not be uncommon for West or East African plays to feature “one excellent escapee [or more] from South Africa’s ‘King Kong’” as was the case during a 1965 (or 1966) performance of Wole Soyinka’s *The Road* at the Commonwealth Festival.<sup>82</sup> Even the Manhattan Brothers attempted an acting/variety act career with the Leon Gluckman-directed *Nymphs & Satires* show in 1965. Though a disastrous production in that it lasted only four weeks, the reviews of the Manhattan Brothers’ contribution was rather glowing.<sup>83</sup> The Brothers’ act was described by Lewis Nkosi as “impressive,” while Mogotsi’s performance was

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<sup>80</sup> Michael McMillan and SuAndi, “Rebaptizing the World in Our Own Terms: Black Theatre and Live Arts in Britain” in Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II and Gus Edwards, eds., *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>81</sup> Cordeaux, “The BBC African Service’s Involvement in African Theatre,” 149.

<sup>82</sup> Mercedes Mackay, “Africa and the Commonwealth Festival,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 258 (Jan. 1966): 28.

<sup>83</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 12 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

described by one *Sunday Times* critic as “a diamond without flaw.”<sup>84</sup> Despite such acclaim, “the otherwise dull” show did little to launch their acting careers.<sup>85</sup>

Unfortunately, these actors inevitably found the roles available limited by their race and South African background. They regularly found themselves only cast for “black” roles, which seems to have frustrated those actors to transcend race and fully integrate into the British acting world. Perhaps the most significant actor in this regard was Alton Kumalo, who used his experience with *King Kong* to secure admission to the Central School of Dramatic Arts, and afterward became a “permanent member” of the Royal Shakespeare Company until 1972.<sup>86</sup> Despite this extensive training, his blackness often prevented him from getting many of the key parts.<sup>87</sup> “There is always Othello,” Gluckman remarks in 1969, “but [even Kumalo] admist [*sic*] that he will have to grow a bit.”<sup>88</sup> As time went on, Kumalo appears to have gotten increasingly bitter as time wore on and he told literary scholar Stephen Gray a decade later:

I left the Royal Shakespeare Company. ...I suppose out of personal frustration, but also you get tired of doing Shakespeare after a time. I suppose I'd just outgrown the RSC politically; I don't think I was doing the right thing, playing messengers and servants – I was unhappy with that; in fact, I did become quite vocal about that and in the end they promised me – I ended up doing Fabian and so on. Shakespeare's very good – it's all philosophical, it's all diction, it's good. But

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<sup>84</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 12 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>85</sup> Lewis Nkosi, “Jazz in Exile,” *Transition*, 34.

<sup>86</sup> Alton Kumalo, “Interview with Alton Kumalo (London 9 April 1980),” in Stephen Gray, ed., *Athol Fugard* (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), 119; and “Treatment” section, p. 11 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>87</sup> Jatinder Verma, “Cultural Transformations,” in Theodore Shank, ed., *Contemporary British Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 56; and “Treatment” section, p. 11 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>88</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 11 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

after a time you want to do everyday things, and particularly for me as a black actor I knew I was going to be given no big part like your Hamlet, and I needed to stretch myself.<sup>89</sup>

Thus it does seem that Kumalo grew increasingly frustrated with the limited roles that he received with the RSC solely due to his race.

It was out of this frustration at being a black foreign actor within a classically white British theatrical world that presumably caused Kumalo (along with Oscar James) to create the Themba Theatre Company in 1972.<sup>90</sup> Kumalo's hope for Themba was that it could become a place for black actors in Britain to develop their skills and gain the experience needed to crack into mainstream theatre by performing plays that stretched popular notions of black actors. "Also I felt, and in England it's still happening now," he told Gray, "there's not one centre doing black plays as a professional thing. And so Temba [*sic*] was created to give artistic expression to black culture, or to the things that concern black people, Third World people, as such...."<sup>91</sup> Consequently, Themba staged plays written by black playwrights or dealt with "black" issues, such as Athol Fugard's *Nongogo* and *No-Good Friday* in November 1974 (the first time both plays had been performed outside of South Africa, which Kumalo played the roles of "Sam" and "Willie" respectively).<sup>92</sup> The company's impact was considerable as it along with the Black Theatre of Brixton, according to British performers/activists Michael McMillan

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<sup>89</sup> Kumalo, "Interview with Alton Kumalo (London 9 April 1980)," in Gray, ed., *Athol Fugard*, 119.

<sup>90</sup> D. Keith Peacock, *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 150; and Verma, "Cultural Transformations," in Shank, ed., *Contemporary British Theatre*, 56.

<sup>91</sup> Kumalo, "Interview with Alton Kumalo (London 9 April 1980)," in Gray, ed., *Athol Fugard*, 119.

<sup>92</sup> "No-Good Friday" and "Nongogo," in Athol Fugard, *The Township Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3 and 56.



and SuAndi, “produced more black plays in two years [some time during the 1970s] than the whole of English theatre had in the previous twenty-five.”<sup>93</sup> Despite threats of losing funding and subsidies as it butt heads with its sponsors, the Themba Theatre Company thrived for nearly two decades and helped paved the way for black playwrights, actors and actresses to crack mainstream British theatre.<sup>94</sup>

Due to the pioneering efforts of Kumalo and other black figures in British theatre, one such actress that was able to crack into mainstream television and theatre was the leading lady of *King Kong*’s British version, Peggy Phango. After struggling to find any steady acting roles during the 1960s (which led to a brief retirement from performing), Phango mounted a significant comeback and appeared in numerous television programs and on stage until her death in 1998.<sup>95</sup> While never a major star, she founded a significant career and demonstrates the growing acceptance of black actors and actresses with Europe as time prolonged.

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<sup>93</sup> McMillan and SuAndi, “Rebaptizing the World in Our Own Terms: Black Theatre and Live Arts in Britain” in Harrison, Walker and Edwards, eds., *Black Theatre*, 118.

<sup>94</sup> Kumalo’s Themba may have also been the first black-run company to receive annual funding from the Arts Council. See Yvonne Brewster, *The Undertaker’s Daughter: The Colourful Life of a Theatre Director* (London: BlackAmber Books), 198; and Peacock, *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*, 150.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Knipe, “From tradesman’s daughter to stage,” *Mail & Guardian*, August 21, 1998, available at [www.mg.co.za/articledirect.aspx?articleid=181499&area=%2farchives%2farchives\\_\\_print\\_edition%2f](http://www.mg.co.za/articledirect.aspx?articleid=181499&area=%2farchives%2farchives__print_edition%2f) (accessed on December 10, 2008); Tom Vallance, “Obituary: Peggy Phango,” *The Independent* (London), September 3, 1998; and “Peggy Phango,” Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0679664/>.

## Back Home

Many of these exiles faced prolonged separations from their friends and relatives. Though they would apply to return home for visits, most would be “refused permission.”<sup>96</sup> This severance naturally caused much pain, and most sources about the Kongers, such as autobiographies and interviews, regularly highlight the particularly heartbreakingly common experience of missing the funerals of parents, grandparents, children and other loved ones. Mogotsi lost his son, father, mother and sister who all died while he was exiled abroad. Though he did succeed in returning once in 1972, he was barred from returning twice (when his son and later his father died).<sup>97</sup> Such separations caused many families to drift apart.

If the inability to see loved ones back home was not too difficult to bear, then confronting the expectations of those friends and family back home possibly was. Not wanting to share news of their difficulties outside of South Africa, many of the Kongers often cut off communication to those back home. “Todd rode high for a moment in time before stumbling on a bitter truth that he could never write home about,” notes John Matshikiza of his father’s embarrassment about his struggles abroad, “so great was the humiliation that would have been pass back along that fragile and proud family line that

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<sup>96</sup> Mogotsi did eventually succeed in getting a teenaged granddaughter relocated to England in the late 1980s. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 106-7; and “Treatment” section, p. 2 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>97</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 97-99; and “Remember Joe Mogotsi?” *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), April 25, 1997, online archive (accessed on November 22, 2006).

ultimately led all the way back to the Eastern Cape.”<sup>98</sup> By being based in Europe, those back home falsely assumed that the Kongers were professionally and financially better off. “Those of us who had been exiled in England had to struggle for our existence. We did not have the black American situation [the large population of black consumers interested in African music] here [in Britain]. Consequently, we were only able to give limited help to those at home,” claims Mogotsi.<sup>99</sup> Not being able to translate such expectations into reality presumably caused much embarrassment and perhaps caused these exiles to purposely limit their communication with those in South Africa. It may be for this reason that Mdledle never reconnected with his family back in South Africa, even though he lived to see the fall of apartheid (he died in 1995) and presumably was able to return to the land of his birth.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the embarrassment of their position abroad, many retained some communication with their close friends and family in South Africa. This process was not as easy as one would initially think as those back home often lived near or below the poverty line and often lacked telephone service. Additionally, such communication could lead to one’s associates being harassed by the apartheid state. Mogotsi notes of such a situation:

Mother had been called into the office several times and asked about my movements and what I was involved in overseas. I had been writing to my nephew, Oupa, regularly. Some of the letters

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<sup>98</sup> John Matshikiza, “Prologue: notes of a journey of towards (sic) a biographical exploration,” unpublished paper presented to WISER, 10. Obtained at <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.z/PDF%20Files/wirs%20-%20matshikiza.PDF> (accessed on December 10, 2007).

<sup>99</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 114.

<sup>100</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

never reached him and those that did he removed from his home for fear of being arrested. Although my mother was 80 years of age, she was often picked up for questioning.<sup>101</sup>

While Mogotsi does not list why authorities would be interested in finding out information about him, it seems logical that such frustrations would propel the Kongers to become active within the exiled African National Congress, South African Communist Party, or other wings of the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>102</sup>

Interestingly, however, the Kongers residing in Britain were only marginally involved in anti-apartheid politics. Despite the activism within London's anti-apartheid community between the 1960s and 1980s, there appears to have been little connection between the organization and the professional careers of the Britain-based Kongers. Upon initially arriving in Britain, many Kongers did attempt to directly link their careers to the South African political movements based abroad. At one such ANC-organized function in Algeria in the early 1960s, Phango, the Manhattan Brothers, Matshikiza and others performed as part of the celebration of that nation's independence. Following the performance, however, they found few similar opportunities throughout the coming decades. "On our return to London we expected more tours on behalf of the ANC," remarks Mogotsi, "but there was no follow up and it all fizzled out."<sup>103</sup> Though some possessed personal connections to the ANC, such as Joe Mogotsi whose cousin was

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<sup>101</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> There appear to be numerous possible answers to this issue. It is possible that such as the letters may have been lost in transit or never written at all, and that the exiles simply blamed the apartheid forces for their own failure to consistently write to their loved ones. However, it appears more probable that officials simply wanted to harass the family members of those on the outside or in the case of Mogotsi, intelligence officials were probably hoping to amass information on Mogotsi in hopes of gaining information on the movements and actions by his cousin, Adelaide Tambo, and her husband, ANC president Oliver Tambo.

<sup>103</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 77.

married to ANC President Oliver Tambo, and thus were “always in touch” with the movement by extension of their relatives and friends, they appear to have avoided political activism unless it could aid in their performing careers.<sup>104</sup>

Without future professional opportunities within the anti-apartheid struggle, it seems that British Kongers collectively avoided politics as they apparently could hinder one’s career. Matshikiza, for one, lost out on a position with the BBC after he attended the festivities in Algeria, which his wife cites as the “bitter blow, from which he never recovered.”<sup>105</sup> The tenuous nature of their performing careers and relatively meager wages meant that they could not afford the luxury of becoming politically active. As the West grew increasingly weary of the intermingling of communism and various anti-apartheid groups, it seems that the Kongers formally disconnected themselves from the movement since there was little to be gained and much to lose professionally by being directly associated with the ANC, SACP or any other similar group. With such a lesson learned, it appears logical why, and likely that, the Kongers remained apolitical while abroad. It was only when Western popular culture became increasingly fascinated with South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement during the 1980s that the Kongers’ formal connection to politics resurfaced. It seems that only as this rejuvenated interest in the anti-apartheid movement provided more professional opportunities, such as appearing in

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<sup>104</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 327.

films or performing at concerts, did the participation of the British Kongers reemerge within the movement.<sup>106</sup>

### **Assimilating into the Real World and Real Jobs**

Similar to finding a place within London show business, these exiles faced sizeable difficulties in assimilating into British society. Though Gluckman claims that Walter Loate was “totally integrated”<sup>107</sup> or that David Serame “feels English,” it seems that various others struggled a great deal to adjust and acclimate to life in Britain.<sup>108</sup> By 1969, Phango believed, according to Gluckman, that “it will take her a lifetime to get to understand them [the British people].”<sup>109</sup> Some, such as Klaaste, simply never adjusted to life in Britain. Known for his disdain for London cold, he reportedly wore two coats one on top of the other year-round.<sup>110</sup> Beyond his distaste for the weather, Aggrey Klaaste, his brother and prominent South African newspaper columnist, noted that Sol learned early on in exile that “some bad things [are] also happening in that other Eden [Britain].”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Such examples include Peggy Phango narration of the film, *South Africa Belongs to Us*, in 1980 or the Manhattan Brothers reuniting to perform at various anti-apartheid event during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>107</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>108</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 8 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>109</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 9-10 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>110</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>111</sup> Aggrey Klaaste, “Down memory lane-,” *The Sowetan* (Johannesburg), December 20, 1982.

In this “other Eden,” all the Kong exiles needed to confront issues of integration and assimilation into mainstream British society. Whereas America possessed a long dark history regarding race relations, blackness in Britain was a relatively new phenomenon when in the 1960s West Indian and African immigrants began flooding to the metropole, and thus racism seems far less engrained in mainstream British society. With that said, this situation caused an equally ugly, if not uglier, situation for black immigrants within Britain. Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech of 1968 encapsulates the fears concerning race and immigration of many in post-war Britain. Powell stated in his speech, “We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre.” He continued:

The Commonwealth immigrant came to Britain as a full citizen, to a country which knew no discrimination between one citizen and another, and he entered instantly into the possession of the rights of every citizen, from the vote to free treatment under the National Health Service. ...But while, to the immigrant, entry to this country was admission to privileges and opportunities eagerly sought, the impact upon the existing population was very different. For reasons which they could not comprehend, and in pursuance of a decision by default, on which they were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers in their own country.<sup>112</sup>

Such sentiments were held by much of Britain’s white citizenry throughout this era, as they widely believed that these new waves of immigrants and people of color were changing the United Kingdom for the worse. As the British government predicted that these new immigrants and their descendants would eventually make up roughly one-tenth of the national population, which many like Powell believed would ultimately turn white

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<sup>112</sup> Since audio of the speech remains rare, the transcript of this speech was obtained from the *Telegraph*’s website, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> (Accessed on January 28, 2009).

citizens into strangers “in their own country.” Beyond expressing what many felt, Powell’s speech also triggered further overtly racist, xenophobic acts by the British populace.

It was within this psychological and political climate that the Kongers found themselves, and those Kongers in Britain tell far more explicit stories of being hassled or discriminated against due to their race or nationality. Such stories directly conflict with the images and statements made about life in Britain during the arrival in 1960. Back then, they were thrilled by the friendliness of the London police and the fact that they could travel where they wanted when they wanted without carrying a “pass.” Thus it seems that the longer that these exiles stayed away from apartheid South Africa, the more it seeped in just how racist their host country truly was or that it was rapidly taking a much more intolerant stance to people of color. Writing of Klaaste’s experiences in London, Gluckman highlights that though “[h]e has never experienced any tensions because he is black—when he is working. Away from the pub, it is a different matter...”<sup>113</sup> Matshikiza recalls one such instance when he and his adolescent son needed to conduct an extensive search for a barber as all informed him that they did not cut “that kind of hair.”<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the needs and wants of the Kongers changed a great deal since 1961. Now these men and women wanted things like suitable housing, barbers that would cut their hair, and decent paying jobs that could support their families. All three of these were harder to come by than they initially expected.

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<sup>113</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>114</sup> Todd Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 70.



This issue of accommodation was perhaps the arena where the Kongers encountered the most profound, acute displays of British racism. The accommodation point is one that surfaces time and time again throughout the historical record as finding a place of affordable rent was incredibly difficult for many Londoners, but doubly so for its black residents. Matshikiza almost immediately recognized the difficulty in finding housing in London upon his arrival, but it appears that he accepted that this problem was a common occurrence for every resident. “We are still looking desperately for a house... People pay up to a hundred pounds a month for rent, and it’s not the colour of your skin either,” he lamented in his *Drum* column.<sup>115</sup> As he spent more time in Britain, Matshikiza realized how his race impacted his housing search, which he thoroughly documents in his autobiography, *Chocolates for My Life*. He describes searching the classified sections of London newspapers looking for employment and finding terms like “Europeans only” and that most landlords did not want to rent to him and his family.<sup>116</sup> Though Matshikiza did eventually find a “Coloured Preferred!” advertisement, it was a prank supposedly done by a local “Fascist organisation” in order to send “Coloured people walking all over London on useless errands.”<sup>117</sup> Similarly it appears that Klaaste, according to Gluckman, found that “accommodation is always a problem.”<sup>118</sup>

Despite the racial climate in Britain, the Kongers were somewhat able to transcend local color lines through personal relationships as, though some married other

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<sup>115</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 70.

<sup>116</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 68.

<sup>117</sup> Matshikiza, *Chocolates for My Wife*, 69.

<sup>118</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

South African exiles or West Indian immigrants, many married white Brits. By the end of the 1960s, Phango, Hazel Futa, and Jerry Tzagane all married white British citizens. While it remains unclear how mainstream British society viewed these relationships, it does seem that there was some resistance to such intermixing as Gluckman planned to highlight the “neighbours’ reaction” in his proposed documentary. The sheer fact that the British Kongers married local whites, whereas the American wing did not, however, remains puzzling and may hint at an atmosphere in Britain that better accommodated such relationships than America.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the pursuit of housing, the pursuit of employment emerged as another driving factor in the lives of the Kongers, and only a few of the Kongers in Britain remained active in show business as actors or musical performers as time wore on. Most of these Kongers’ early dreams and hopes of life abroad never materialized, and they needed to take on “real” jobs. Many found admirable and respectable but everyday lives in that they never met the expectations (both their own and what South Africans expected) when they left for London in 1960. After being forced out of the Manhattan Brothers, for instance, Majola gave up on his dreams of making it big as a performer and took on a job at a London dry-cleaners, where he took an estimated “£20 a week.”<sup>120</sup> Patience Gwabe, on the other hand, found employment as a hostess and occasional

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<sup>119</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 8 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>120</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

performer in West End strip clubs, where she acquired the nickname of “princess.”<sup>121</sup>

Those that still performed did so in a much more limited capacity than anticipated.

Mogotsi, once the stalwart leader of the Manhattans and talent scout for his wife’s agency (where he even aided in signing a Afro-funk band, Matata, that the agency helped popularize in Britain during the 1970s),<sup>122</sup> for instance, retired from show business all together and took up a position as a security officer in 1975, an industry that he would remain in for nearly twenty years.<sup>123</sup>

Part of this shift in profession was connected to the family lives of the Kongers. As they aged, settled down and started their own families, their priorities often shifted as demonstrated earlier with Mrwebi’s decision to pursue steady employment at a publishing house rather than to continue struggling within the music world. After having children of her own with local jazz pianist Johnny Parker, Phango briefly retired from performing from music to become a full-time homemaker and as Gluckman points out, “her responsibilities – and her ambitions – have changed a great deal.”<sup>124</sup> Though Phango later re-launched her acting career as her children got older, the collective experience of the Kongers serves to demonstrate the delicate and difficult balance struck between their personal and professional lives. Similarly Hazel Futa too faded out of the spotlight after she found “her English husband” and relocated to Manchester, hardly a

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<sup>121</sup> Script from *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

<sup>122</sup> “Connor, Pearl,” in Dabydeen, Gilmore and Jones, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, 114; and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 90-1.

<sup>123</sup> He and the Manhattans would later stage a comeback during the late 1980s (early 1990s?) as the anti-apartheid movement became renewed. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 94-5.

<sup>124</sup> “Treatment” section, p. 8 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

bastion of opportunity for an entertainer.<sup>125</sup> Thus it seems that the balancing of their personal lives with their professional lives translated into often relinquishing their long time goals of making it big in the music or acting world.

## **Conclusion**

By 1980, the Kongers in Britain collectively failed to live up to their initial expectations of life in exile set forth by themselves as well as their friends and families back home. British society and culture remained unwilling to popularly welcome their music and performative styles. In the arenas of theatre, television and radio, the Kongers fared slightly better as they were able to fill a growing need for black actors and actresses during the era. Though few regretted their decision to remain abroad after the musical's run, the exile had proved quite different from what they dreamt of back in 1961. Beyond their expectations, their own worlds had changed as they now increasingly had husbands, wives and children, and thus the priorities within their lives needed to change accordingly. Many came to believe that had they surfaced in America that things would have been better. As we will see in the next chapter, this belief was often true but life in America came with its own unique set of challenges.

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<sup>125</sup> "Treatment" section, p. 8 of *Alive and Well and Singing in Bradford* Documentary, 95.2.2.2.1, Leon Gluckman Papers, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

## Chapter Five

### **“The Boy’s [and Girl’s] Doin’ It”: Moving to America and Re-Discovering Africa, 1960-1985**

While *King Kong* was still being staged in South Africa, a select few members from the musical’s cast and orchestra began trickling into America. Three such participants from *King Kong* (Jonas Gwangwa, Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela) had already defected for America to pursue careers or schooling between 1960 and 1961. These exiles would be joined three years later by two former cast mates, Caiphus Semanya and Letta Mbulu. Immigrating to America initiated a vitally different experience for the Kongers from that of their peers in Britain.

By examining the experience of the Kongers who surfaced in America, this chapter demonstrates that where these performers wound up while in exile fundamentally shifted the paths of their careers. Whereas the performers in the previous chapter struggled to survive as black South African artists in Britain, their peers in the United States discovered the performative and cultural environments there to be ultimately more welcoming. Instead of struggling, they flourished. Rather than chalking this occurrence to a simplistic rationale, such as suggesting that these immigrants were vastly more talented than their peers in Britain or that they cashed in on opportunities proffered by the American economy (or the American dream), the Kongers’ success in America appears due to their luck in arriving in a country with a thriving music industry.<sup>1</sup> America’s place

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<sup>1</sup> I find the former explanation unsatisfactory because many of the exiles in Britain had been major talents in their own right. Back in 1950s South Africa, they were major figures within African

as the global center of popular culture provided the Kongers with many more opportunities for success than their counterparts found in the United Kingdom. Additionally, the United States possessed a much larger black population that was interested in their music and their African backgrounds, and this community willingly popularized and consumed their product. Due to the demands of both the American music industry and the nation's black population, however, the music of the Kongers in the United States shifted drastically during their time abroad. The Kongers quickly realized that Americans wanted to hear music from Africa, and they followed suit by incorporating musical traditions from all over sub-Saharan Africa, as well as various Afro-Latin American cultures, to appease the desires of their fans.

This welcoming climate, however, did not only extend to the Kongers' music. It also shaped them politically, as it spurred them into taking on the role of vocal and visible political activists interwoven into the anti-apartheid movement. Unlike in London, with its sizeable South African population and status as a hub of anti-apartheid activism, the Kongers emerged as the most prominent South Africans in America during the 1960s and 1970s. Their visibility spurred pressure by their friends, families, politicians, fans, and peers within American music to discuss the situation back in apartheid South Africa.

This chapter concludes by demonstrating that these increasingly "Africanized" sounds and imagery, as well as active political lives, forced these South African

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nightlife and they too had respectable performing careers and recorded music while living abroad. Thus this theory seems untenable.

performers to reconsider the place of the African continent within their lives. Despite their collective success in America, most sought a closer relationship with African cultures and societies whilst in exile. As their time away from South Africa prolonged, they made extensive visits or even relocated to various nations within sub-Saharan Africa. The reasons for these travels are numerous and will be addressed within this essay. Again, this path proved considerably different than their peers in Britain who relocated, as Todd Matshikiza was the only person of that group to permanently relocate to Africa. Thus it appears that the American Kongers desired some sort of cultural reconnection to Africa that did not occur within the British contingent.

Taken together, the British and American *Kong* contingents faced vastly disparate experiences regarding their musical careers, their involvement in politics and their relationship to the African continent. All three experiences serve to underline how one's location within exile often affected major aspects of their lives. This chapter argues that the burgeoning interest in Africa within America, including African dignitaries residing in America, compelled the American Kongers to "Africanize" their sounds and images as well as emerge as vocal anti-apartheid activists, and that these occurrences ultimately spurred most of them to emigrate to various nations within sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Choosing America over Britain**

At various points within their lives abroad, most of these exiles recognized that their chances of success would be greatly increased in America. Some discovered this point earlier than others. After being forced to return to Johannesburg during *Kong's* UK

performances for his unruly behavior and mental health problems, saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi lamented to *Drum* magazine that a “guy has no chance in London.”<sup>2</sup> He continued, “I think if I was in America it would be better.”<sup>3</sup> This type of sentiment pervaded the thoughts of many Kongers, particularly after they faced the bleak realities of pursuing professional careers in Britain. Hugh Masekela too remembers considering a move to America almost immediately after arriving in London (despite anti-apartheid activist Trevor Huddleston and prominent British musicians Yehudi Menuhin and Johnny Dankworth having already secured Masekela’s admission to London’s Guildhall School of Music) simply because he “just had America on [his] mind.”<sup>4</sup> Moeketsi’s and Masekela’s points reflect the prevalent belief that South African performers would be welcomed into jazz music’s mecca: America. The European jazz scene was dwarfed by America’s, and many South African performers found it unexciting to be within the London jazz circuit.<sup>5</sup> If only they could get to America, they apparently assumed, they would connect to the African American community, its culture and its stars—all of which so profoundly shaped black life and society in South Africa—and that their skills would be recognized, allowing them to pursue careers there as professional jazz performers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Casey Motsitsi, “Kippie-Sad Man of Jazz,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Casey Motsitsi, “Kippie-Sad Man of Jazz,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), December 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Masekela and D. Michael Cheers, *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 104, 115 and 119-20.

<sup>5</sup> Though performers such as Hylton and Dankworth were relatively well-known in South African music circles, they were ultimately dwarfed by their American counterparts like Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated earlier, black South African performers possessed strong ties (real and imagined) to African America culture. These connections were manifested in various ways, from Hugh Masekela receiving a trumpet from Louis Armstrong, appropriating American-esque like the “Manhattan



In hindsight, such observations proved quite accurate as the Kongers who did surface in America faced greater professional opportunities, and virtually all found careers on the other side of the Atlantic. Echoing this outlook, Manhattan Brother Joe Mogotsi admits, “England was a tough country. Things might have been very different if we had gone to the States where there were millions of black people to support our shows.”<sup>7</sup> As this chapter will demonstrate, however, those who did make it to America would face their own fair share of trials and tribulations.

### **Kongers Coming to America**

For many in the *King Kong* cast, life in America proved far different from their preconceived notions, which they derived from film, music and magazines. These naïve conceptions of the United States simply did not reflect the American reality, which they found out almost immediately upon their arrival. “In South Africa, we really think that every American is rich. It’s hard to disbelieve the pictures we see so many times in the movies. We all want to live like people do in the cinema,” Makeba writes of her own preconceived notions of life in the US, “and so we think to do so we have to live in America.”<sup>8</sup> Masekela remembers a similar rude awakening, “[C]ar horns, stuttering air hammers, screeching tires, screaming voices; street sweepers; garbage collectors running to and from grubby, noisy garbage trucks, toting gigantic plastic bags and cans of trash;

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Brothers” or “Woody Woodpeckers,” the participation of Sidney Poitier and Canada Lee in *Cry, the Beloved*, or comparing Moeketsi to Charlie Parker in order to proclaim his world-class talent.

<sup>7</sup> Joe Mogotsi with Pearl Connor, *Mantindane, “He Who Survives”: My Life with The Manhattan Brothers* (Copenhagen: The Booktrader, 2002), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Makeba with James Hall, *Makeba: My Story* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 105.

cyclists, joggers, and dog shit on the sidewalk—I could not believe the pandemonium. I quietly wondered if I had made the right decision.”<sup>9</sup> Gwangwa too faced a similar dilemma upon arriving in America. Despite being “impressed” by the “automatic doors” at the New York airport, he remembers the rude awakening upon his arrival to New York: “I was very excited about going to the United States, but it wasn’t what I thought it was, of course... then the taxi went through Harlem and right there... phew! It was like deflating. This is America! Ja, it’s a slum, you know. I said, ‘Ah! So this is New York?’ (Laughs).”<sup>10</sup>

As detailed in the previous chapter, the African members of *King Kong* struggled adjusting to the racial climate of London in 1961. Their peers who surfaced in America too faced similar problems. Masekela writes, “[I]t quickly became clear that the freedom we in South Africa assumed existed for people of African origin in America was a mirage... and not think this place was that different from South Africa. The methods of racial terrorism might be applied differently here, but the disposition was the same. This was apartheid wearing a different hat.”<sup>11</sup> This racism in America manifested itself in manners different from those in London or Johannesburg, and it does seem that black South African exiles faced a much easier time in acclimating to America’s racial environment in various ways.

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<sup>9</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Jonas Gwangwa, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 337.

<sup>11</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 127.

As opposed to those in London, for instance, none of the written accounts by *Kong* exiles make mention of any problems regarding their searches for housing due to racist landlords. On account of their better connections and the prominence of their careers, these exiles lived mainly in either the New York or Los Angeles metropolitan areas while residing in the United States, where they readily found housing. It also seems that their Africanness, the compelling plight of being an exiled South African, and their higher profile may have soothed the fears of would-be racist landlords.

Beyond the disparities between the British and American Kongers in terms of career success and the racism that they encountered, the Kongers who ended up in America almost exclusively focused on musical performance, composition, and production, unlike their peers in Britain who often pursued careers in theatre and television or found “regular” jobs. As noted previously, most Kongers in Britain could not sustain themselves on their artistic talents alone and sought out professions outside of music or acting. For the Kongers in America, this would not be the case and virtually all sustained themselves on music alone.

In spite of its advantages, the exile experience in America was surely a trying one for this group. After failing to return to South Africa with *King Kong*, most were barred from reentering into their home country and they joined the growing numbers of the South African political diaspora spread across the globe. Unlike those in Britain, where South African exiles clustered together in significant numbers and the Kongers themselves “form[ed] collectively a veritable ‘verwoerdstan’ in London,” these exiles

needed to contend with the expansive geography and relatively smaller exile population of America.<sup>12</sup>

They also struggled to fit into the society's surroundings. Reflecting on his experience in exile, Gwangwa shared with a reporter from *The Star* in 1996, "[I]n exile you were always reminded that you had overstayed your welcome. You were always trying to blend among the natives. You'd think that you'd got the language down—but then someone would ask you about something you didn't know."<sup>13</sup> Thus these South Africans were constantly reminded that they were different and sometimes unwanted by their hosts.

In order to combat such judgments as well as to recreate an atmosphere of community similar to back in South Africa, they routinely banded together. These attempts were manifested in varying ways. The marriage of Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, for example, appears to epitomize the South Africans' need to recreate their indigenous society while in exile. Though infrequently dating inside South Africa, their relationship solidified in the US, as their common identities and experiences pushed them closer together.<sup>14</sup> When Semanya arrived in America with *Sponono*, he initially lived with Masekela and Makeba in the couple's apartment. The former *Kong* cast mates petitioned to get a visa for his wife, Letta Mbulu. Together both couples along with Makeba's daughter moved into a house in suburban New Jersey, and later Makeba

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis Nkosi, "Jazz in Exile," *Transition*, Number 24 (1966): 34.

<sup>13</sup> Andile Xaba, *The Star*, Tonight supplement, March 8, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> It does seem that this shared experience of being an exiled South African musical performer could not alone sustain their relationship as the two divorced in 1965. See Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 138.

secured a New York City apartment for the newly arrived couple, furnished it, paid their first year's rent, secured gigs for Mbulu and got Semenya into acting school.<sup>15</sup> Masekela extended a similar (albeit more frugal) welcome to Gwangwa upon his arrival years earlier, and the two shared an apartment in New York during their studies.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the collective prominence of the American Kongers among South African exile circles also made them quasi-patrons of a low but growing number of exiled South African friends, musicians and university students surfacing in the United States. Their homes developed into makeshift bases of operation for exiles, often housing an array of extended family members, colleagues and friends. In exchange for their hospitality, the exiles had the opportunity to hear news of friends and relatives, speak their native tongues and reconnect with "home." This invaluable support system helped ease their assimilation to America, and also produced some amusing tales like slaughtering goats in Manhattan apartment bathtubs in an attempt to cook "some genuine, home-style cuisine."<sup>17</sup>

Without these connections, it seems that South African exiles could easily fall prey to depression.<sup>18</sup> This sentiment is echoed in Masekela's admission of often going to Central Park to "find a solitary area, and talk to myself in all different home languages I could muster." On one occasion, he was stopped by a police officer who was

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<sup>15</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 129 and 133.

<sup>16</sup> Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 337; and Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 160.

<sup>17</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> One notable exiled South African writer, Nat Nakasa, committed suicide by jumping off a building. Though rumors persist that he was literally pushed by South African security forces, it does appear to have been a suicide.

“[c]oncerned for [his] sanity” to which Masekela responded, “Sir, officer, I am quite all right. I’m from South Africa. I’ve been here for six months and have not spoken my language too much. I was talking to myself, pretending to be conversing with some of my buddies back home.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the Kongers needed to rely on one another and other exiles to maintain their identities as South Africans or risk their mental and emotional health.

### **Being African in America**

While these performers never fully assimilated into or felt completely comfortable in their American surroundings, together the group left an indelible stamp. In many ways, their work and personalities encapsulated the period of change and turmoil emerging in these locales between the 1960s and 1980s, and one can even argue that the Kongers’ careers are woven more so into the collective memory of the 1960s America than within South African memory of the same era.<sup>20</sup> While they would not find a South African population as large and consolidated as in Britain, they did find an extremely large African American community sympathetic to the South African struggle and one finding a renewed interest in Africa and African culture. Whereas Esmé Matshikiza observes that her husband’s career in Britain was ill-timed, as that society would not widely embrace multiculturalism until the 1980s and 1990s, the Kong exiles that came to

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<sup>19</sup> Maskela, *Still Grazing*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> In addition, two songs from the Kongers (one by Makeba, one by Masekela) are featured in *Bobby*, a 2006 film about the period of change taking place within the 1960s surrounding Bobby Kennedy’s presidential run and subsequent assassination.

America arrived at perhaps the perfect moment for an African musician or singer to enter into the United States.

Almost concurrent to the Kongers' arrival in America, the United States, the African continent and the world were undergoing major changes. Between 1956 and 1966, thirty-four African nations gained independence. Seventeen of these came in 1960, the very same year Makeba arrived in the United States. Due to this rapid decolonization, Africa's position within the world was suddenly shifting. Instead of being outright controlled by European colonizers, now Africans were participating and voicing their own concerns through international bodies like the United Nations.

During roughly the same period, black citizens in America gained equal rights and freedoms through the civil rights movements led by Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X among others. Seeking to justify their equality within a white-dominated society, African Americans looked to gain a greater awareness of their African heritage or "roots." This era also witnessed the growth of Afrocentric belief systems adopted by groups such as the Nation of Islam and by Afrocentric scholars, who pushed the ideology of Africa being the birthplace of civilization.<sup>21</sup> These efforts caused a reevaluation of Africa and its cultures by America's black population. In post-WWII United States, Africa became, in the words of Bernard Magubane, "no longer a far-off but inescapable embarrassment or negative stereotype."<sup>22</sup> This rejuvenated interest in Africa had a profound effect on black popular culture across

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<sup>21</sup> Bernard Magubane, *The Ties That Bind: African-American Consciousness of Africa* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1989, second printing), 184.

<sup>22</sup> Magubane, *The Ties That Bind*, 203.

America, as these energies propelled the teaching of Kiswahili in New York public schools as well as the introduction of wearing dashikis and the sporting Afro haircuts that asserted the recognition of the validity of African culture.

Whether or not Africans and African Americans themselves fully or consciously realized it, these two movements were markedly linked. Remarking on the interconnectedness of both movements, preeminent South African sociologist Bernard Magubane retrospectively states, “The independence movement in Africa caused for the first time (even though still on a limited scale) direct knowledge of the Afro-American by the African and of the Africans by the Afro-American.”<sup>23</sup> These two distinct but related shifts created a fertile landing ground for the Kongers arriving in America as they found two powerful advocate groups in African dignitaries and the African American public.

It was precisely at the dawn of this period of renewed interest in Africa that the Kongers arrived in America, and capitalized on it completely, as they benefited a great deal from this confluence of the dawn of African Independence, the rise of Afro-centric scholarship, the peak of Pan-Africanism, the renaissance interest in Africa by African American communities, and the interconnected nature of the African anti-colonial and American civil rights movements.

The Kongers’ impact on America and these cultural connections between Africa and the African diaspora occurred on many levels and went far beyond just their contribution to music.<sup>24</sup> The Kongers emerged as emblems of African sophistication,

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<sup>23</sup> Magubane, *The Ties That Bind*, 196.

<sup>24</sup> I will directly address their impact on music later in this chapter.



modernity, culture, achievement and development, and thus fed conveniently into the growing interest in Africa.<sup>25</sup> For many Americans, the Kongers were the first Africans that they were exposed to either on television or the radio, and this exposure did much to convey a new imagery of Africa and its peoples. “They [the American press and television] talked about the way I dressed, the clothes I wore, my short hair. They mentioned my jewelry,” Makeba notes, “the way I carried myself, the way I danced. I was just so completely different.”<sup>26</sup> Thus Makeba and her fellow Kongers essentially became icons and ambassadors of Africa to a black America of the 1960s and 1970s seeking to recapture their connection to their heritage.

Some even credit Makeba with introducing the Afro haircut to African American fashion, and Makeba herself jokes, “I wish I had known what I know today, I would have gotten royalties on the Afro and the Afro comb.”<sup>27</sup> While one could certainly argue that the style existed previously in some form or another,<sup>28</sup> a search of *ProQuest’s Historical Newspaper Index* of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* databases show no mention of Afro hairstyle or haircut in their paper until at least 1968, nearly a decade after Makeba’s migration to the United States.<sup>29</sup> Her future husband and

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<sup>25</sup> Article in *Jet*, April 29, 1979, cited from Genia Fogelson, *Harry Belafonte: Singer & Actor* (Los Angeles: Melrose Square Publishing Co., 1991), 201.

<sup>26</sup> Miriam Makeba with Nomsa Mwamuka, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 62.

<sup>27</sup> Lionel Rogosin, *Come Back, Africa!: A Man Possessed* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 125; and Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Carmichael himself points out that Odetta, an African American performer in the south, also sported a similar hairstyle.

<sup>29</sup> Lending more credence to this theory is Makeba’s observation that initially her short hair caused many Greenwich Village residents to question her heterosexuality. See Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 70.

African American activist, Stokely Carmichael, remembers being shocked by the “natural” hairdo worn by this “classic Xhosa beauty.”<sup>30</sup> Ironically, few photographs of her in South Africa show her with the hairdo and she may have been forced to sport this shorter hairstyle after having been unable “to find anyone in America who can braid it properly.”<sup>31</sup> While this evidence fails to fully prove the theory of Makeba introducing the Afro to black America, it certainly seems likely that her sporting of the hairstyle while presenting a sophisticated Africanity to the American public certainly aided in further popularizing the hairstyle as it became emblematic of the campaigns of the 1960s that stress the beauty within blackness and a renewed interests in Africa.

The Kongers’ contributions to the diasporic conceptions and celebrations of Africanity are further demonstrated with Caiphus Semenya’s involvement with the soundtracks for the television series *Roots* (1977) and the film *The Color Purple* (1985).<sup>32</sup> Both productions present aspects of the experience of black peoples in America and are now considered seminal productions within African American popular culture. Semenya’s involvement with both encapsulates the relationship between the Kongers and black American notions of their own history and connections to Africa. These productions had virtually nothing to do with South Africa, but the fact that Semenya came from a nation that had little to do with the trans-Atlantic slave trade (and thus did not possess a direct cultural connection to the slave experience) did not preclude him

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<sup>30</sup> Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Scriber, 2003), 99.

<sup>31</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 117.

<sup>32</sup> Quincy Jones, *Q: the Autobiography of Quincy Jones* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 369.

from working on these projects that were so intertwined into popular African American consciousness.

Another example of these diasporic connections that the Kongers participated in is the marriage of Makeba and African American civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael. Their marriage became a “symbolic [but also literal] union between black America and the [African] continent” for the African American press.<sup>33</sup> Thus it seems that in America these performers and their contributions to American culture were largely welcomed by the African American community, whereas the Kongers in Britain were either viewed as unwanted immigrants by the British working class or culturally distinct from Britain’s two largest black populations of West Indian or West African descent, and thus failed to fully integrate into either community.

Despite offering the imagery of Africa that 1960s America now desired, there does appear to have been some cultural negotiation and the Kongers apparently did in some cases try to alter their looks, presentation and behavior in order to conform to the tastes of American audiences. Harry Belafonte, for instance, stressed that Makeba always be punctual, demonstrate good posture, look interviewers in the eyes, wear stylish clothing, and even sent her to the dentist to fix a natural gap between her front teeth, and thus be more presentable to Western audiences.<sup>34</sup> Such instances only serve to stress the complex negotiation occurring between Africa, the diaspora and American popular culture (with Kongers smack dab in the middle).

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<sup>33</sup> Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 655.

<sup>34</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 66.

## Africanizing American Music

The most profound impact of the Kongers' collective arrival to America was their introduction of African music to American audiences. "I think it may have been the first African song I consciously heard... It made me tingle and tap my feet. Of course, I could not understand a single word," Carmichael wrote remembering the first time he heard Makeba on the radio, "but the sounds of the language seemed hauntingly familiar."<sup>35</sup> While Carmichael's memory is no doubt tinted by his personal relationship with Makeba, his memory remains relevant, as the hits of Masekela and Makeba were the first songs by African performers that aired on American radio. As the first prominent African musicians to face widespread success and relative longevity, they did much to influence the conception and depiction of African music by Western audiences.

As noted earlier, those in America overwhelmingly found better professional opportunities than the set of *King Kong* exiles based in Britain. In his own memoirs, Stein compares the differences between the experiences of exiled performers based in America compared to those in Britain:

In America it was different for musicians. You could see how very different, from the story of Miriam Makeba, she of the glorious voice. In turn too arrived in London... I brought her to meet JD [Johnny Dankworth] and he did his best, throwing a party for this great jazz lady so that she could meet all the chiefs of entertainment in Britain. The only notice taken of her was to be offered a ten-minute slot on Television West and Wales. TWW! Why, I could have auditioned for that myself, belting out varsity songs in my own rusty rugby voice. ...Well, Miriam wasn't going to spend a lifetime working her way to the top in that jazz-cold climate and turned to the USA instead. Instant acceptance. Within weeks she was auditioned, taken up and promoted by Harry Belafonte, then splashed on national TV networks; her *Click Song* became a hit, a world hit—a hit even in Britain!—and she embarked on a quarter century of fame.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> Sylvester Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?: A Historical Caprice* (London: Corvo, 2003), 189-90.

Stein's observation holds true, as Britain seemed unwilling to promote the music and careers of these foreigners. These musicians and singers regularly flourished (despite the exile community within the United States being more disparate than in Britain), even if their performing styles would need to change in order to attain this success.

As members of America's music scene, the Kongers collectively found themselves initially flustered to now be meeting (and often receive praise from) the very American celebrities that they idolized back in Johannesburg. Masekela remembers meeting Louis Armstrong for the first time:

I must have talked to death about how his trumpet made the Huddleston Jazz Band the envy of South African musicians because of the news coverage. Satchmo kept smiling. Here I was standing with the man whose banning from South Africa when he visited the continent had angered me so deeply because I had lost a chance to shake his hand in person and thank him for the trumpet. I had envied so much all those people I saw shaking his hand in press photographs. But now here I was, alone with the great Satchmo. It was more than a dream come true. The only thing I've always regretted is that I didn't have my picture taken with him right then.<sup>37</sup>

Often their American peers were shocked and pleased that South Africans appreciated their work, while also being keen to find out what was really going in South Africa.<sup>38</sup> As the Kongers became established performers in America, they began to perform regularly with a vast variety of actors and musicians, including such notables as Count Basie, Barbara Streisand, Dizzy Gillespie, Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor, Bing Crosby, Mahalia Jackson, Dennis Hopper and Stevie Wonder.<sup>39</sup> Makeba, in particular, rapidly surfaced within American society and even sang at a birthday party for U.S. President

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<sup>37</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 165.

<sup>38</sup> Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 287.

<sup>39</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 165; Davis, *Miles*, 345; and LaShonda Katrice Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 119-20.

John F. Kennedy. In essence, the *Kong* exiles in America became fully interwoven into the fabric of United States stardom, so much so that Miles Davis's own autobiography regularly notes Masekela's presence within jazz and popular music scenes and attendance at notable events throughout the era.<sup>40</sup> Eventually these larger than life idols developed into close friends, confidants, collaborators, allies and advisors.<sup>41</sup>

No particular mentor loomed larger in the careers of these *King Kong* exiles than Belafonte. Their relationships with him, whether direct or indirect, provided them with an advantage over the *King Kong* refugees still in London. After a chance meeting at a London television studio in 1960 where Makeba was publicizing her relatively minor role in *Come Back, Africa*, Belafonte took her on as his main protégé. Belafonte remembered, "I had suggested to her that there might be some things that I could offer and some platforms that I could extend to her that might help her develop her base in America and in Europe, and she accepted that offer. And for the next seven years, we were together... with great consistency. For the first three years, she worked on my platform, in my concerts."<sup>42</sup> Belafonte's connections, advice and backing transformed her into a recognizable and respected talent. Soon after she was regularly booked for performances and television interviews while her songs received heavy rotation on American radio.

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<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Miles*, 287-8, 345, 353 and 386.

<sup>41</sup> This trend would continue for other South African artistic exiles. For many of the Kongers and their growing number of South African musical exiles in America, their careers could be jumpstarted by forming close ties and affiliations with African American performers. The career of Cape Coloured pianist, Abdullah Ibrahim, took off after an encounter with Duke Ellington and his entourage. See Nkosi, "Jazz in Exile," 34.

<sup>42</sup> Harry Belafonte, interview by Farai Chideya, "Harry Belafonte Remembers Miriam Makeba," *News & Notes*, National Public Radio, November 11, 2008, obtained at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96869372> (accessed on March 3, 2009).

Through his influence, she appeared on *The Steve Allen Show* and her debut performances at the Village Vanguard “sold out every night” for nearly a month almost immediately upon her arrival to the United States.<sup>43</sup> These debuts were followed by a performance at New York City’s Blue Angel Club, a stint in Las Vegas, the Waldorf Astoria’s Empire Room, and later a tour of various American universities.<sup>44</sup> Collectively these performances and the related publicity quickly attracted many prominent black and white fans, and made her a prominent star almost immediately upon her coming to America.<sup>45</sup>

By the arrival of the other Kongers to America, Makeba herself was promptly emerging as a legitimate pop star in America, and she used her own connections to facilitate their careers and lives of her peers from *King Kong*. In the case of Masekela and Gwangwa, Makeba pressured Belafonte along with other notable American performers, such as Dizzy Gillespie and John Mehegan (who already knew both young instrumentalists as they recorded together during a Johannesburg visit in the late 1950s), to lobby for Masekela’s and Gwangwa’s acceptance into the very exclusive Manhattan School of Music, where Makeba would supplement their school fees and living expenses.<sup>46</sup> After establishing themselves through the Belafonte-Makeba network, most Kongers exploited its connections as well as their own developing list of contacts to further their own particular careers, as well as those of other exiled peers. Whether it was

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<sup>43</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 62; and Belafonte, interview by Chideya, “Harry Belafonte Remembers Miriam Makeba.”

<sup>45</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 119; and Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 72.

transcribing prison work songs from the American South for Belafonte's music publishing company or recording their own albums, this network provided numerous opportunities for all those within it.<sup>47</sup>

Not all of the *King Kong* exiles could tap into this network, however, and it seems that those in Britain saw little of their peers' success trickle down to them. In 1964, the Manhattan Brothers' agent attempted to contact Makeba and her representatives, but received no response.<sup>48</sup> "Miriam and Hugh had a better time of it [in exile]. When things got really tight I tried to find them through Harry Belafonte's office in America. I asked if they could include us in their shows, we had included Miriam after all," said Mogotsi in a 1997 interview, "but it was like writing to no one. We never got replies at all."<sup>49</sup> The slight went even further as Mogotsi claims that she never contacted the Manhattan Brothers to perform with her during any performances in Britain.<sup>50</sup>

Despite essentially ignoring the plight of those in Britain, the *Kong* exiles based in America remained close and their interwoven personal lives fermented into numerous professional collaborations, which took place so frequently that their careers repeatedly overlapped at various points throughout their lives in exile. They shared knowledge of life abroad, contacts within the music industry, and where to go to find schooling or gigs. Makeba credits Masekela and Gwangwa for "creatively and practically" aiding her "early music and my early recording career," and specifically cites Masekela as being

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<sup>47</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 146 and 155-7.

<sup>48</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 84.

<sup>49</sup> "Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 97-99; and "Remember Joe Mogotsi?" *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), April 25, 1997, online archive (accessed on November 22, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 84.



“instrumental” in setting up Makeba Music Corporation, her music publishing company.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore she tapped Gwangwa to help her publish *The World of Miriam Makeba* (a music book containing the lyrics and notation for many traditional Southern African songs) and he also conducted and arranged the Grammy award-winning *An Evening with Harry Belafonte and Miriam Makeba* (1966) while Semanya, Gwangwa and Masekela eventually formed their own band (aptly named “The Union of South Africa”) in 1971. Semanya, Makeba, Mbulu, Gwangwa and Masekela repeatedly wrote songs for one another. All serve as reminders that these exiles needed one another both professionally and emotionally. Masekela chose Gwangwa to play on his second album, while also pointing out that almost all of his recordings abroad “contain one or two of Caiphus’s compositions.”<sup>52</sup> At one Los Angeles concert featuring Makeba, Semanya and Mbulu, the group brought in Gwangwa as their trombonist and both Masekela and Gwangwa worked together on choreographing a gum-boot dance routine for the event.<sup>53</sup> In essence, they banded together to carve out a niche in the Western music industry whereas those in Britain often competed with one another as well as black acts from the Caribbean and West Africa. The American Kongers also possessed a strong knowledge of each other’s skill-set and material, and thus presumably could provide a sounding board in how to further appropriate Southern African traditions and songs into their now international careers.

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<sup>51</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 72.

<sup>52</sup> “Ha Le Se Le Di Khanna” is, for example, a Semanya-written song. See Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 171, 175 and 187.

<sup>53</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 135.

As musicians and singers, the Kongers' collective African identity surfaced as arguably their strongest asset while in America. Numerous prominent black American performers pushed the Kongers away from performing conventionally popular American music genres, such as jazz or blues. Instead they advised the Kongers to use their African backgrounds to differentiate themselves from local performers and sounds. Masekela recounts:

I had come to New York as a bebop musician, hoping to one day become a member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers or Horace Silver's Quintet, or to play in Les McAnn's group, but when I broached the subject with any one of them, the answer was always, "Hughie, why don't you form your own group?" This frustration was lightened by Belafonte, who said to me, "Why don't you play music from your home? Look at what it's done for Miriam." Dizzy Gillespie told me the same thing, and Miles Davis always said to me, "Hughie, there are thousands of us jazz musicians in this country. You're just gonna be a statistic. But if you play some of that shit from South Africa and mix it with the shit you know from here, you gonna come up with something that none of us can do. Fuck jazz, man. You don't wanna do that shit, ma'fucker. You know what I'm saying?"<sup>54</sup>

Through this quote, one grasps how these pressures to Africanize sound came from within the African diaspora rather than from a natural or organic progression from their own African backgrounds. Once embraced, many believed these exiles could differentiate themselves from other black performers and carve out impressive recording careers.

Part of this thrust towards a more African sounding music may also be due to the fact that many within American show business believed that these performers simply did not possess the skill-levels and ability to compete in the America jazz world. In this regard, their South African background of playing Americanesque jazz music proved detrimental, as upon arriving in America, Gwangwa himself noticed "some differences"

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<sup>54</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 165.

between American and South African jazz styles and described his own playing as “like jazz with an accent.”<sup>55</sup> Back in South Africa, Masekela and Gwangwa could, as Matshikiza so aptly puts in a 1960 *Drum* column, “give anybody a beating on their instruments,” but their playing would have to change in order to succeed in America or it would be they who received the figurative beating.<sup>56</sup> While Miles Davis’s own autobiography corroborates Masekela’s memory of their conversations detailed above, he presents them in a harsher manner. He admits that Masekela’s trumpet playing skills as “very fine,” but points out that “[he] didn’t think he played black American music too well.” As Masekela began “doing his own thing,” Davis believes that Masekela’s “playing got better.”<sup>57</sup>

Makeba’s own transition into American popular music was smoother, as she had already strayed away from jazzier songs prior to *King Kong*. Naturally she relied on many of her sets from home during her early years abroad, and thus appeased the demand of foreign audiences almost immediately.<sup>58</sup> Combined with Belafonte’s backing, her “most unusual sight and sound” made her a near-instant star in the United States.<sup>59</sup> Thus while initially being hyped as “South Africa’s No 1 Jazz Singer,” her songs were

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<sup>55</sup> Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 339.

<sup>56</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “With the Lid Off,” *Drum* (Johannesburg), January 1960 republished in Todd Matshikiza and John Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off: South African Insights from Home and Abroad, 1959-2000* (Johannesburg: M&G Books, 2000), 42.

<sup>57</sup> Davis, *Miles*, 287-8.

<sup>58</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Unnamed article from the *New York Telegram* taken from Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 62.

distinctly African and, by default, new to American audiences.<sup>60</sup> Describing the reaction to Makeba on their tour of American universities during the 1960s, Belafonte remarks, “[T]hey just delighted in hearing her, ‘the Click Song,’ and singing in African tongues and the rhythms. The young people just absolutely delighted in it.”<sup>61</sup> Such tunes formed a fertile foundation for her international career, and “Pata Pata,” one of her signature songs, had been previously released in South Africa, entered the American music charts “in the top five” (with this version being arranged by Gwangwa).<sup>62</sup>

To further increase the range of her performance repertoire, Makeba also sang “traditional songs” from South Africa, such as “Ngigula Nginani” and “Angiqomi Kwazulu.” This tactic vastly expanded her recording possibilities, and further stressed her Africanity. This process, however, was not without its controversy as many of these songs may not have been as “traditional” as Makeba claimed and it appears some were written by her South African peers during the 1940s and 1950s (presumably these artists were never approached for their share of the royalties).<sup>63</sup> One such song that Makeba recycled was “Qongqothwane.”<sup>64</sup> Known widely as “the click song” since it possessed many isiXhosa clicks in it, the tongue popping sounds caused Western audiences to “go wild.”<sup>65</sup> Thus while this song probably would not particularly excite any audiences back home, its dissimilarity from any other known song in the West immediately differentiated

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<sup>60</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 60.

<sup>61</sup> Belafonte, interview by Chideya, “Harry Belafonte Remembers Miriam Makeba.”

<sup>62</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 140; and Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 339.

<sup>63</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 62.

Makeba from any other singer known to these audiences. It became a major reason for her rise to stardom in America.

To complicate matters even further, Makeba not only performed these songs but also registered many such songs as her own compositions and stole the song rights from their original composers. These songs included “Jikel’amaweni,” “Mamoriri,” “Magwalandani,” and “Ndixolele,” as well as the aforementioned “Qongqothwane,” all of which were originally composed by one or all of her *King Kong* cast mates, The Manhattan Brothers, whom she repeatedly snubbed while in exile. The theft of “Qongqothwane” is perhaps most significant as the song made her into a legitimate star in America.<sup>66</sup> Thus by copyrighting it, she effectively cut them out of receiving any royalties from its success.<sup>67</sup> The use of such songs fostered jealousy and resentment from their original composers, as well as the recording companies back home that owned the rights to many of these compositions.<sup>68</sup>

With these expectations to play “African” music, the Kongers needed to face the additional caveat and challenge that Western audiences generally possessed fundamentally flawed views about what exactly African music was. Writing in 1969, ethnomusicologist Klaus Wachsman explains:

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<sup>66</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 60; and Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 85-6.

<sup>67</sup> It must be pointed out that such actions were ripe throughout the South African recording industry throughout the twentieth century. Mogotsi claims that the Manhattan Brothers’ song, “Hela Ngoaneso,” was re-released as “Tom Hark” by a pennywhistle group where it received significant success and is often considered a classic South African pennywhistle tune. Often such issues would not even begin to be sorted out until the downfall of apartheid during the 1990s. Therefore Makeba may have seen her actions as simply par for the course. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 85-6.

<sup>68</sup> Mogotsi claims that this went unresolved until 1993 when Makeba relinquished the rights to the various songs that she had claimed were hers. He even goes as far to reprint the letter that he received from her regarding this matter. See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 85-6.

One is tempted to declare dogmatically that African music is now popular in the West. But on close inspection the statement needs qualifying: it would be more to the point to say that West African percussion, rather than African music, has succeeded. If proof is wanted, it must be very rare that one finds concerts or performance groups for Bushman and Pygmy vocal music, for the harp music of Uganda, for the songs of Mauretania [*sic*], to mention only a few of the neglected styles. In the minds of Western listeners, Guinea Coast percussion has become the image that must serve for all music from Africa. Rather than conclude that African music is not uniform, audiences will label other sounds as “Arabic” or “Oriental.” It is extraordinary how little can be said with authority as to what is “exotic” in African music and what is not.<sup>69</sup>

If Wachsmann’s observations are accepted as accurate, then it must be noted that this insight did not bode well for the Kongers as West African percussion sounds were not the specialty of the trombonist Gwangwa, trumpeter Masekela or vocalists Makeba and Mbulu. Thus while being African differentiated them from other black performers in the West, their skill-sets possibly put them at odds with the Western music industry’s notions of African music. They—and their approaches to music making—would need to change.

Adapting to better fit themselves within these accepted notions of African music, the Kongers generally underwent a process of further “Africanizing” their sound once in exile. Beyond their own compositions, the Kongers drew upon musical traditions and sounds from across the African continent and thus foreign even to them. They engaged in this Africanization on multiple levels. Masekela’s definitive hit, “Grazing in the Grass,” was actually composed by Zambian composer Philemon Hou, and Masekela would later employ Hedzoleh, a band consisting of Nigerian and Ghanaian musicians, as his backing band during the 1970s.<sup>70</sup> Similarly Semenya, Mbulu and Makeba employed comparable tactics as Semenya’s contributions to the *Roots* soundtracks were often

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<sup>69</sup> Klaus Wachsmann, “Ethnomusicology in African Studies: The Next Twenty Years,” in Gwendolen Carter and Ann Paden, eds., *Expanding Horizons in African Studies* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 133-4.

<sup>70</sup> Zan Stewart, “Lasting Impressions,” p. 2 in liner notes of Hugh Masekela, *The Lasting Impressions of Ooga Booga*, CD, (Polygram Records, 1996).

inspired from Nigerian music, Makeba adopted the Swahili song “Malaika” in her acts, and Mbulu would release a LP entitled “Kilimanjaro.”<sup>71</sup> The Kongers, in general, absorbed African musical traditions, topics, songs, and themes as their careers progressed outside of South Africa, and produced a sound different than virtually any other music on the planet.

In this endeavor, the Kongers were well-equipped from their formal and informal training from 1950s South Africa. Back in Johannesburg, Masekela and his peers localized American jazz music to fit their South African lives, which their own music regularly reflected. Often they attempted to make their music sound similar to jazz musicians in America, perhaps best demonstrated by historian John Mason’s observation that a 1959 release by the Jazz Epistles (a group that included Masekela, Gwangwa and Moeketsi) sounded so American that it “might as well have been recorded in New York or Detroit.”<sup>72</sup> Now they were undergoing a similar process in reverse: making their music sound more African than American.

This demand for Africanness within their music afforded them with both musical maneuverability and a deep pool of music traditions from the “Third World” from which to draw. They were not confined to South African musical traditions, and for the Kongers, virtually any musical tradition from sub-Saharan Africa as well as Afro-communities throughout Latin America were at their disposal. They could absorb a vast

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<sup>71</sup> Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder*, 120; and Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 136.

<sup>72</sup> John Mason, “Mannenberg: Notes on the Making of an Icon and Anthem,” in *African Studies Quarterly*, Volume 9, Issue 4 (Fall 2007), available at <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v9/v9i4a3.pdf> (Accessed on March 23, 2009): 25.

array of sounds and styles and fuse them with American genres of jazz, funk and R&B to compose a product unique to the ears of Western audiences. As Western audiences only knew what they believed to be “African” sounds, the Kongers adopted and performed music from virtually all over the globe. Though this trend of borrowing sounds from all over the globe was underway already within jazz music (such an example is Herbie Hancock’s use of music from the Ba’aka people of the Central African Republic in his album entitled *Head Hunters*), the Kongers were specifically expected by fans and the music industry to produce “African” songs and sounds. The fact that Americans were naïve on where “African” sound came from only aided the Kongers, as they could offer West African-laced songs that they possessed little authority over anymore than an American jazz musician. By being Africans, however, it appears that it was believed that the Kongers were offering a more authentically African rendition.

Similar to the shifts within their music, the Kongers own appearances adapted to this era and its interest in their African backgrounds. Their albums covers, publicity photos, and concert posters pictured them in African regalia. This modification in appearance is remarkable when one considers that they came from an era in Johannesburg where “tribal” fashion and images were often downplayed and most successful performers looked more along the lines of tsotsis wearing Western slacks, shirts, hats and other slick “can’t gets.”

This marketing of their African identities and its incorporation into their acts too came with drawbacks and obstacles. While Makeba’s click songs (she did two songs with significant clicks, “Qongqothwane” and “Baxabene Oxamu”) allowed her to



differentiate herself from black American performers, they also pigeonholed her as “the click-click girl.” “I didn’t like that at all,” she remarks, “it made me feel like those songs were the only songs I had ever done, and the only songs that people would remember me by!”<sup>73</sup>

Another dilemma was that though the world accepted the Kongers as African performers, it shied away from accepting their renditions of Western music genres and songs. Thus while American society accepted and lauded their playing tunes inspired by South African, Zambian, Ghanaian, Nigerian and even Afro-Brazilian cultures, their efforts of playing more traditionally American jazz styles were often rebuffed. Masekela’s faced this problem with first recording, *Trumpet Africaine* (released in 1962). Based around traditional big band compositions, with the exceptions of one Makeba track and a Haitian song, it faced harsh criticism from music critics, and Belafonte described the album as “antiseptic, jive, white music.”<sup>74</sup> It was only after he and his fellow Kongers established themselves with their “African” music that audiences came to accept many of their covers of American hits and playing of recognizably American styles.

Despite their identifiably “African” music, the lines between the African and the American in the Kongers’ recordings commonly became obscured. These Kongers regularly recorded with black American musicians. Furthermore, Motown Records eventually signed most of them at one point in time. Such close association occasionally led to the Kongers music being much closer to African American music than audiences

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<sup>73</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> It must be pointed out that Masekela’s second album consisting of “township favorites” fared only slightly better. See Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 156-7 and 173.

realized. Masekela's partner on the Chisa label, Stewart Levine documents one such instance, "Wilton Felder on bass and Joe Sample on piano were going from our sessions over to record on the first Jackson Five sessions (A.B.C. etc.) and if you listen closely to Mahlalela [a song on the album] you might notice a similar feel in the bass lines of these supposed two different styles of music."<sup>75</sup> In other words, this process was not as extreme as one would initially suspect, as these exiles were also fusing obscure sounds to a proscribed popular music formula.

Progressively during the 1970s, the Western music industry began marketing a newly defined music category called "World Music."<sup>76</sup> An amorphous label, it became a problematic catchall for music forms, such as Brazilian *samba* and Celtic music, which did not fit in their folk, jazz or rhythm & blues genres. As these South African musicians branched out and diversified their sounds, they emerged at the forefront of the new category as they had been performing songs from American, British, Brazilian, Jewish and various African traditions. Masekela, for one, excelled at mashing together Brazilian music, a Zambian composed tune and a Ghanaian backup band with his growing knowledge of American and South American music forms. Stewart writes:

Trumpeter-composer Masekela's approach was different. Where Morton and Gillespie were American jazz musicians, Masekela is a South African. And while he embraces jazz in his performances (he's obviously been influenced by Louis Armstrong and Freddie Hubbard), there is a deep and solid foundation to his art that's clearly African, built around the sounds of his

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<sup>75</sup> Stewart Levine, "Before there was 'World Music' ...there was CHISA," liner notes from Hugh Masekela, *Hugh Masekela Presents The CHISA Years: 1965-1975 (Rare and Unreleased)*, CD (Bbe/Beat Gen, 2006).

<sup>76</sup> Makeba told interviewer LaShonda Katrice Barnett, "I think it (the World Music category) is shorthand of a sort, because what they really want to label African music is third world music, and I have a problem with that. We all live in the world. We all come from the world. Do you know of music from other planets? [laughter] So what is it to say that African singers or Indian singers are performing world music?" See Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder*, 123.

homeland; indeed, he has called his music “Township Bop.” Because of this African core, which Masekela has blended not only jazz, but with pop and rock as well, there’s good reason to suggest he was the first “world” musician.<sup>77</sup>

It is fitting that the South African Masekela would gravitate towards so many musical forms from all over the globe since the process of musical composition back in 1950s Johannesburg was to synthesize the sounds of American, British, Dutch and African cultures. Growing up with an African (though technically coloured) background in multiracial urban locales, Masekela’s youth was spent listening to American jazz but also local music forms.

Unfortunately for the Kongers, they were often not able to fully capitalize successfully on this growing interest in the “World Music” niche. “We recorded ‘Letta Mbulu’ on CHISA,” writes Stewart Levine, Masekela’s long-time friend and professional compatriot, “which was distributed by Motown and we thought it to be quite an achievement. To their credit so did they along with people like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and Lamont Dozier who thought this album was a killer. But Motown couldn’t find a way to market it.”<sup>78</sup> Thus it seems that by remaining on the forefront of World Music and absorbing so many of the musical traditions around them, the Kongers collectively presented a difficult dilemma to a music industry still figuring out how to market this sound. It is perhaps for this reason that popular history often identifies the collaborations of Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon with various African performers during the 1980s as the

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<sup>77</sup> Stewart, “Lasting Impressions,” p. 1 in liner notes of Hugh Masekela, *The Lasting Impressions of Ooga Booga*.

<sup>78</sup> Levine, “Before there was ‘World Music’...there was CHISA,” liner notes from Hugh Masekela, *Hugh Masekela Presents The CHISA Years: 1965-1975 (Rare and Unreleased)*.

introduction of “World Music” to popular audiences.<sup>79</sup> The Kongers, on the other hand, were truly creating “World Music” literally decades before it was accepted by the mainstream or recognized as hip to do so.

### **Politics and the Performer Post-Kong**

As noted in the previous chapter, the *King Kong* exiles in Britain generally resisted formal involvement with the anti-apartheid movement and politics. The American contingent, on the other hand, reacted to their exile in a different manner, and often became significantly involved within the struggle. As their stays in exile prolonged, these exiles generally became more politically active, aware and vocal. Early on in his life in America, Masekela admits to missing his family, but not “missing my country yet.”<sup>80</sup> Once he and the others began to miss home, they embarked on a new era. Thus it appears that as they saw their exiled friends without ever seeing their native homeland again or failed to visit dying loved ones back in South Africa, they realized that they too may never return home and see their friends and families. This realization forced them to become bitter, angry and resentful of the apartheid regime and thus emboldened their political attitudes and transformed them into vocal anti-apartheid advocates. Remarking about this transition, Makeba claimed on a radio broadcast in 2006, “You say, OK, are you going to sit here, Miriam Makeba, and say 'I'm a star' and forget about home? Or do you decide to say 'I'm a South African and this is what is

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<sup>79</sup> See Peter Gabriel’s *Melt* (1980) and Paul Simon’s *Graceland* (1986).

<sup>80</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 144.

happening to our people' and so on? And I made that decision. And from then on, I was branded that artist who sings politics.”<sup>81</sup>

Few became immediately involved in the anti-apartheid movement upon their arrival abroad.<sup>82</sup> Back in South Africa, black artists during the 1950s overwhelmingly avoided involvement in organized politics in order to avoid confrontations with, or harassment from, the police and South African security forces. In short, they considered themselves foremost to be black performers while in South Africa. Thus there often existed a firm (albeit unspoken) separation between music and politics within black Johannesburg society, and it seems that the Kongers initially expected this trend to continue during their lives abroad.

In America, however, they became visible, and increasingly vocal, ambassadors of the anti-apartheid struggle. Their widespread exposure and popularity provided them a platform unavailable to politicians, activists or academics. Due to this development, apartheid activists, African dignitaries and their friends pressured the Kongers to air their attitude about apartheid. Furthermore the storylines emphasized by the American media emphasized the Kongers being black South Africans barred from returning home. Together they increasingly were put at odds with the apartheid state, and they were prodded to voice their opinions.

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<sup>81</sup> Miriam Makeba, interview by Farai Chideya, *News and Notes*, National Public Radio, August 15, 2006, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5650847> (accessed on March 3, 2009).

<sup>82</sup> The only instance that I have found where a *King Kong* exile participated in formal politics in any capacity prior to 1963 was Todd Matshikiza leading “an ANC concert party” for Algeria’s independence celebration. See Esmé Matshikiza, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 327.

While this essay earlier demonstrated how African American performers became professional mentors to these exiles, this interaction went far beyond just conversations on how to build a career. These performers discussed the similarities in both the black American and South African struggles, and these two movements became increasingly intertwined from the 1950s onward.<sup>83</sup> The American civil rights struggle, in particular, had a profound impact on the Kongers' political outlook. For Masekela, Malcolm X emerged as "a model for me of how a man of African origin should project."<sup>84</sup> These close ties with Belafonte and other politically vocal African American performers, along with urging from African politicians and other South African exiles, pushed the Kongers to become far more politically engaged than their peers in Britain. With Belafonte's urging, Makeba rapidly became more vocal, and she remembers him telling her, "One day you might have a special role to play for your people."<sup>85</sup> For her, that day came roughly three years after her arrival when she spoke against the apartheid regime at the UN and emerged as one of the anti-apartheid's struggle's most well known representatives.

By the mid-1960s, the Kong exiles possessed ample motivation, as the Sharpeville shootings had taken place, the Rivonia trial concluded with either the convictions or exiling of the ANC leadership, and virtually all opposition units within the

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<sup>83</sup> This point is perhaps best demonstrated by the "joint statement appealing for the imposition of international sanctions against the white minority regime of South Africa" presented by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Albert Luthuli, a Nobel Prize-winning South African politician, in 1962. See Magubane, *The Ties That Bind*, 216.

<sup>84</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 138.

<sup>85</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*, 67.

country were banned. Thus it appeared now that apartheid may never end, and without its demise, the Kongers feared they could never return home. After realizing that their stays abroad were now mandatory rather than voluntary, the Kongers too realized that they could use their platform as popular performers to publicize the plight of black South Africa. Masekela remembers Makeba telling him to “[w]ork hard and let’s keep trying our best to find ways to improve the plight of our people who are suffering back home,” which first caused him to entertain the “thought [that] I could ever be in a position to effect any changes against apartheid through music.”<sup>86</sup>

Their positions within American popular culture made them into ideal cultural ambassadors of the black South African struggle and thus they emerged as powerful players in swaying public opinion amongst both their fans and their peers within various entertainment industries. In a letter to various figures in entertainment for the “South African Crisis and American Action” conference, Makeba and Belafonte together plead for American performers, writers and artists to “break off all professional contact with South Africa until the present iniquitous system shall have been abolished.”<sup>87</sup> They sought to convince these prominent figures that they were otherwise “bolster[ing] apartheid inadvertently.... [as the] publication of their work and appearances in South African mean that American artists tacitly accept and even condone the existing pattern

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<sup>86</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> South African Crisis and American Action Letter from Harry Belafonte and Miriam Makeba to Langston Hughes, February 10, 1965, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

of segregation and white domination.”<sup>88</sup> Such an example demonstrates how the Kongers attempted to directly use their prominence and clout within the entertainment world to directly benefit the anti-apartheid struggle.

Beyond being trailblazing on the political front, the Kongers’ political beliefs and stances were further shaped by the political climate brewing around them. The 1960s and 1970s within America were periods of great political change and turmoil. As residents in America, they could not separate themselves from the upheaval confronting the United States, such as race riots or the seemingly never-ending conflict in Vietnam. These sentiments are abundantly clear, for instance, in “Mace and Grenades” from the *Masekela* album, where one can gauge Masekela’s despair about the violence and oppression occurring across the globe. Thus many Kongers embarked on an effort to aid all causes on their side, such as the black freedom struggle in America and the fight for African liberation, as well as the anti-apartheid movement. The houses of Makeba, Gwangwa, Masekela, Mbulu and Semanya, as a result, often morphed into meeting grounds for African politicians, American civil rights activists, Hollywood radicals and American-based university students from all over Africa.

Though the Kongers sympathized with the black American freedom struggle and there was cross-fertilization between both movements throughout the 1960s, certain disconnects and fissures festered between the exiles and their black American hosts.

While the Kongers aided African American efforts, such as Masekela playing at a SNCC

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<sup>88</sup> South African Crisis and American Action Letter from Belafonte and Makeba to Hughes, February 10, 1965, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.



fundraiser, they were primarily concerned with the struggles of their own people.<sup>89</sup> Makeba highlights another such instance when Belafonte confronted her for speaking on the behalf of black South Africans but not showing support “when we march and demonstrate” for African American issues.<sup>90</sup> It appears that Makeba believed that her priorities needed to be for the South African people back home, for she considered them “in worse shape than our brothers in America.”<sup>91</sup> Furthermore she notes that she feverishly avoided making such claims out of the fear of angering American friends and show business executives who could close “their doors” on her.<sup>92</sup> Thus the union of these two particular black struggles was neither absolute nor unbreakable.

As the most visible star of the Kongers, it seems only fitting that Makeba would be the first major South African performer to debut within the anti-apartheid movement. Her highly popular position within American popular culture transformed her into one of the movement’s most prominent and recognized spokespersons. Realizing this potential, it appears that both exiled South African political groups and dignitaries from the rest of sub-Saharan Africa courted her to become politically active for the benefit of the anti-apartheid movement. At the invitation of a sub-committee chairman’s request, a Mr. Ibe from Nigeria, Makeba was formally invited to speak to the “Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa.” Reportedly

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<sup>89</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 133.

<sup>90</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 165.

<sup>91</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 155.

<sup>92</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 155.

compelled by the need “to contribute personally to the liberation of the African continent and its peoples,”<sup>93</sup> Makeba stated to the committee on July 16, 1963:

I ask you and all the leaders of the World, would you act differently? Would you keep silent and do nothing if you were in our place? Would you not resist if you were allowed no rights in your own country because the color of your skin is different to that of the rulers and if you were punished for even asking for equality? I appeal to you and to all the countries of the world to do everything you can to stop the coming tragedy. I appeal to you to save the lives of our leaders, to empty the prisons of all those who should never have been there...<sup>94</sup>

She further added that the apartheid regime had turned her nation into “a huge prison” and that if nothing were done that the world would witness “a horrifying disaster.”<sup>95</sup> She detailed the pain and anguish faced by black liberation movements and the harsh responses from the apartheid state by invoking imagery of Nazi Germany by using terms like “concentration camps” and “nightmare” while noting that she did not possess “the slightest doubt” that the regime would kill more women and children.<sup>96</sup>

Her remarks joined those of the many politicians and activists who voiced their opinions regarding apartheid policies on the floors of the UN, but her celebrity seemingly provided more oomph to struggle and a Somali UN ambassador urged that her statement

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<sup>93</sup> “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Makeba’s Speech to the UN Special Committee. Though the committee’s report does not supply an exact transcript of her speech, snippets do exist on the internet, and I have used this clip to detail Makeba’s speech in her own words. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWP5mBJ4HWs&feature=related> (accessed on November 28, 2008).

<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Teltsch, “Miriam Makeba, at U.N., Scores South African Race ‘Nightmare,’ *The New York Times* (New York), July 17, 1963.

<sup>96</sup> Kathleen Teltsch, “Miriam Makeba, at U.N., Scores South African Race ‘Nightmare,’ *The New York Times* (New York), July 17, 1963.

be submitted as “an official document of the committee.”<sup>97</sup> While Makeba was essentially preaching to the choir as the committee consisted of representatives from various Asian, Caribbean, African and Latin American countries largely sympathetic to the anti-apartheid struggle, her testimony on a global stage provided much publicity and the international press heavily covered it.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, as a folk singer rather than a politician, Makeba humanized the experience of Africans under apartheid and made it harder for the regime and its sympathizers to disregard or discredit her. Around this time, she acquired the nickname of “Mama Africa.” This experience rapidly changed her life. “My appearance before the UN Special Committee changes my life... The person Miriam Makeba is no longer just an African singer to them. I am a symbol of my repressed people. To be in such a position is to live with a great responsibility. It is as I am more than myself. And it is scary,” remembers Makeba.<sup>99</sup>

This morphing into a political figure too came with negative repercussions, and it soon became a burden. Soon she found her as audiences and critics enquiring about hidden messages about exile or apartheid within her performances and songs. This near-constant search for perceived deeper meanings into her work became onerous and she felt that such sentiment inhibited her career. She writes:

everything in my life seems to involve politics. Anyone else can go home and see their family, but for me to do so would require changing the political system of South Africa. Any other singer

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<sup>97</sup> “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 113.

can sing a love song and the audience will think about lovers... But when I sing a love song it is, like one critic writes, 'a metaphor for the yearning of a subjugated people to be free.' ...half the audience sees me as a symbol of African nationalism, protest against apartheid, and black pride.<sup>100</sup>

For Makeba, it seems that outside politics she possessed little control over her life, her career, and how audiences received her. Likewise African politicians began petitioning her to take political stances that she felt uncomfortable doing, such as in 1967, when various African diplomats pressured her to drop the Jewish songs from her stage performances in a demonstration of pan-African unity when war broke out between Israel and various Arab states. Coincidentally this situation ultimately caused a severe rift between her and Belafonte (who believed that they should continue singing such songs), and this disagreement partially prompted her immigration to Guinea.<sup>101</sup>

This process rapidly had negative effects on her career. While maintaining that she was “no diplomat, no politician,”<sup>102</sup> her overt activism fundamentally changed her life and career. For this political involvement, Makeba’s career suffered, as her activism blurred the West’s impression of her. Though she would remain popular for much of the 1960s, her increasingly radical activism increasingly worried her record label, show promoters and mainstream fans. Her marriage to Black Panther Stokely Carmichael in May 1968 capped a conversion in the public eye from innocent, sweet nightingale to unwarranted troublemaker.<sup>103</sup> Her career swiftly nose dived as a result. Promoters

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<sup>100</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 154.

<sup>101</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 142-145.

<sup>102</sup> Kathleen Teltsch, “Miriam Makeba, at U.N., Scores South African Race ‘Nightmare,’ *The New York Times* (New York), July 17, 1963.

<sup>103</sup> “Wedding Reception Planned For Stokely Carmichaels,” *The New York Times* (New York), May 18, 1968.

cancelled her already-booked shows, her recording company swiftly disowned her, and her career in most of the world was in near shambles by the 1970s.<sup>104</sup> She devolved into a virtual persona non grata, and she claims to have experienced severe harassment in or bannings from places like Jamaica, the Bahamas, France, Denmark, Senegal and the United States in addition to her native South Africa.<sup>105</sup>

Due to Carmichael's leftist politics and Makeba's own involvement with the anti-apartheid movement as well as her close ties to African dignitaries, it also appears she too became a target of the American authorities, particularly the FBI. She writes of her experiences being followed by these agencies:

It can be Stokely's mother's house in the Bronx, or it can be the airport. They are there. These faceless white or black men in their suits sitting in their cars and looking at me. When I arrive in a city, they come to meet me. They are easy to spot because they are conspicuous. I know the difference between strangers who look at me because they saw me on TV or like my music and these men... We call them our "babysitters," but I am really scared. It is nerve-wracking, and it is something I never would have expected in America. This is really nasty treatment from a country that is supposed to be free.<sup>106</sup>

This transformation is particularly profound if one remembers that just years earlier, Makeba was welcomed by the US government and even sang at President Kennedy's birthday party.

She also became a tool in smear tactics to attack or discredit Carmichael by the US government, rivals within the American civil rights movements, and the Western media. Her success and relatively well-to-do lifestyle could be used to paint Carmichael,

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<sup>104</sup> It would take over a decade with her involvement on Paul Simon's "Graceland" tours as well as a rejuvenated view on the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s to fully rehabilitate her image and revitalize her career within the West. See John Pareles, "Mapping South Africa's Pop Music from Afar," *The New York Times* (New York), February 28, 1988.

<sup>105</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 163-5, 171, 186; and John Pareles, "Mapping South Africa's Pop Music from Afar," *The New York Times* (New York), February 28, 1988.

<sup>106</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 162.

a self-proclaimed advocate for the proletariat, as a hypocrite or an unauthentic revolutionary.<sup>107</sup> Carmichael, on the other hand, claims that the Black Panthers as well as both the CIA and KGB smeared him and Makeba by painting them as CIA informants, which could seemingly discredit both of them and weaken Carmichael's influence within African political circles.<sup>108</sup> Carmichael further contends that such agencies circulated rumors of a romantic affair between Makeba and Guinean President Sékou Touré. By 1968, she was figuratively pushed out of the American mainstream and reacted by fleeing the United States.

While Makeba's experience was unique—since no other Konger made as monumental appearance as a speech to the UN or married someone as prominent as Black Panther Stokely Carmichael—other Kongers increasingly became political as their time abroad prolonged. As exiles were refused reentry into their homeland due to the apartheid politics, they were initially helpless to resist and rebel against the regime. However, as their careers grew they could use their fame and prominence to expose the ills of apartheid, publicize the South African freedom struggle and introduce it to Western populations. These sentiments would be further emboldened follow the uprising of 1976 that started in Soweto but swept across South Africa. Makeba's speech to the UN demonstrates how art and artists could bolster the anti-apartheid movement. It would also compel other Kongers to contribute to the cause.

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<sup>107</sup> "Carmichael Is Reported Buying \$70,000 Home," *The New York Times* (New York), May 28, 1968; Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 164-5; and Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 673-4.

<sup>108</sup> Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 696-9.

Though this section has focused primarily on Makeba's involvement in politics, this does not mean that other Kongers remained apolitical. Gwangwa is the Konger who became most directly involved in formal politics.<sup>109</sup> Feeling a need to tell the world "what was going on in South Africa," Gwangwa formally enlisted in the African National Congress's efforts to bring apartheid to an end.<sup>110</sup> He convinced ANC-delegate (and future South African president) Thabo Mbeki to allow him to organize a number of South African artists into one cohesive act for the 1977 Festival of African Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos, Nigeria.<sup>111</sup> The group's FESTAC and subsequent performances morphed into *Amandla* by 1980. Essentially the "Cultural Ensemble" of the African National Congress, it toured the globe using cultural expression to gain publicity and public support for the ANC, and thus hopefully convince national governments to act against the apartheid state.<sup>112</sup>

### **The Lost Promises of Africa and "Almost" Back Home**

Both their increasingly Africanized performative styles and political activism caused the continent of Africa to resurface within the lives of the Kongers. By the dawn of the 1970s, those in America were becoming increasingly disillusioned with life in the West. Many of these exiles began regularly to visit various African nations during this

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<sup>109</sup> Though Masekela's sister, Barbara, would become a major figure within the ANC, he did not directly get involved with politics. This detachment from anti-apartheid politics may be due Masekela's chronic alcohol and drug abuse, near constant womanizing and financial woes.

<sup>110</sup> Andile Xaba, *The Star*, Tonight supplement, March 8, 1996.

<sup>111</sup> For more on the FESTAC, see *Festac '77* (London: Africa Journal Limited, 1977); E. J. Alagoa, *Festac Remembered: Cultural Intolerance in the Nigerian Nation* (Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation, 2007); and Andrew H. Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>112</sup> Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 338.

time, and increasingly they relocated to these countries (or at least considered the option). The longing for home seems to have become too much for some to bear.<sup>113</sup> Rationalizing his return to Africa, Masekela remarked, “1972 I decided to leave the States, because I had like peaked there.... Success there is a very different situation. I just felt that I owed something—a great deal—to the people at home; and wanted to be closer.”<sup>114</sup> Though most recognized it would “never [be] easy living in Africa,” these Kongers returned to Africa in hopes of reconnecting to a spiritual or cultural familiarity that they had left behind in South Africa and could neither find nor recreate in the U.S.<sup>115</sup> Beyond a longing for home, some began to detest their time in America and feared that their time in exile was corrupting their identities as South Africans. Detailing such sentiments in an interview with Wally Serote, Gwangwa stated:

But listen man, I was in the United States for fifteen years; and I am going to say that, I know, that there is nothing there; there ain't shit in the United States. There is lots of trouble, just lots of it. You get to the United States and you find out; you have moved out of your environment, you have left all that you know behind: you are here in a strange place... So you are cut off but you must grow. So you are caught between staying there and coming back. But you can't come back so you stay. So you assimilate [sic]. You are going to become an Afro-American in the true sense; an Americanised African. I figured that before that happens to me, I have to go back home and try to regroup and gra[b] a little kry[p]tonite.<sup>116</sup>

Despite the irony of Gwangwa using a reference to *Superman* in rejecting his Americanization, relocating to sub-Saharan Africa offered a culture more similar to that of South Africa. For those who surfaced in African nations such as Botswana or Zambia,

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<sup>113</sup> I include Matshikiza in this section despite the fact that he did not relocate to America. I do so as his relocation to Africa aids in telling the story of the Kongers that did.

<sup>114</sup> Hugh Masekela, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 343.

<sup>115</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 206.

<sup>116</sup> Mosa Jonas Gwangwa, interview by Mongane Serote, in *MEDU Art Ensemble Newsletter*, Volume One, Number Four (December 1979): 31.



where growing numbers of South African political exiles were now setting up shop, these performers reconnected with their South African brethren, regularly speaking Zulu or Tswana, eating foods similar to the ones they ate back home, and were generally better able to recreate a sense of home. Esmé Matshikiza recollected, “[I]t was a great excitement for us to be able to go back to Africa, to go to Zambia. And we felt that we are back home. Almost.”<sup>117</sup>

Most Kongers left for America and Britain in the early 1960s thinking that they would return after establishing careers abroad. Others believed they would remain abroad until it was safe enough for their return. Though Masekela states that he possessed little desire to return to South Africa in his autobiography, he told one interviewer that he initially “planned to come back home” early in his career (he remembers this period being around the time after the release of his third album), but was dissuaded by Belafonte. Masekela remembered Belafonte telling him, “Listen. It is better to build your name [abroad], so that when you talk about South Africa it will have clout; and so that if you do go back, people will notice what you say and you won’t be as... you will be a little more untouchable than you are right now.”<sup>118</sup> Instead they found themselves barred from reentering their country at various points throughout their time in exile.

Though some of the *Kong* exiles in Britain did travel to Africa, the American contingent did so with much more frequency. These voyages were perhaps due to the

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<sup>117</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 328.

<sup>118</sup> Esmé Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 342-3.

fact that those in America were by and large more affluent and successful than those in Britain, and thus possessed the means to regularly travel throughout the continent. It also seems that the American Kongers did so to reconnect with African cultures and lifestyles that were vastly unavailable in the United States. Since Britain possessed more sizeable populations of South African exiles and African immigrants, it may be that those based in America lacked such interactions and thus looked to the African continent as a way to re-incorporate Africa into their daily lives in addition to their music.

Another factor behind such migrations was the changing political landscape of Africa itself. As the waves of independence swept across the continent, relocating to Africa became an attractive option for some Kongers. The collective positive energies within African liberation certainly provided some solace to these virtual political prisoners sentenced to life on the outside. Early on in their exile, the Kongers found African nations lending logistical support to them by offering passports. As time progressed, these same nations offered the opportunity for an adopted African homeland.<sup>119</sup> Makeba remarks, “they want me at home, in Africa. Not just Guinea, but other countries have asked me to come and stay. The diplomatic passports they have given me are their way of saying, Come, be with us.”<sup>120</sup>

Both these newly independent African nations as well as the exiled South African political groups based within them began targeting the most accomplished of the South

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<sup>119</sup> Jon Pareles, “South African Singer’s Life: Trials and Triumphs,” *The New York Times* (New York), March 8, 1988; *Makeba: My Story*, 145 and 187; Miriam Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 109-10; and Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 337.

<sup>120</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 166.

African exiles to join them in their efforts, and Makeba, Gwangwa, Masekela and Matshikiza were all encouraged to reside in various parts of Africa to aid in the development. As highly skilled and trained performers, the *Kong* exiles' skill-sets could be used within the nation-building of these African nations still in their infancy. Kenya's Tom Mboya approached Matshikiza in London about composing a new national anthem for Kenya, and Makeba, to help set up a program for Mau Mau orphans. Matshikiza was later recruited by the Zambian government to work on Radio Zambia and afterwards aid in building a "traditional music" archive in cooperation with the nation's Ministry of Information.<sup>121</sup> Rather than being used by an African nation, Gwangwa's own expertise was similarly employed by the ANC to aid in its effort to develop a cultural wing designed to gain international appeal and support for the anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>122</sup>

Another driving motivation for returning to the continent was to seek out additional styles, songs and sounds that these musicians could incorporate into their evolving "African" performative careers. Masekela, for one, benefited a great deal on such trips as he connect with African performers from across the continent, and the various music genres that he discovered on such trips were often incorporated into his albums and performances. His song, "Languta," for instance, served as a tribute to Fela Kuti as well as a reflection of the influence of West African highlife, juju and Afrobeat on his own music.

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<sup>121</sup> John Matshikiza, interview by Hilda Bernstein, MCA 7-1589, Hilda Bernstein Collection, Mayibuye Archives, University of Western Cape; and Esmé Matshikiza, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 328.

<sup>122</sup> For information on these difficulties facing ANC exiles within sub-Saharan Africa, see the forthcoming dissertation by Steve Davis, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Florida.

Beyond these opportunities, it appears that many went to reconnect to a believed African culture that they had left behind in South Africa. They wanted their children to experience life on the continent, and apparently believed that many troubles with their children were caused from life in the West. “I hope that now that she is back in Africa with her own people,” Makeba remarks about her daughter, “she will begin to rediscover herself and become less confused.”<sup>123</sup> Gwangwa traveled to Botswana for a national tour in 1976. Enjoying his reconnection with Southern Africa, and being able to see various family members for “those fifteen years,” he “regularised [his] papers” and relocated to Botswana following the tour’s completion.<sup>124</sup> While Masekela also spent significant chunks of time visiting Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Angola, the proximity of both Botswana and Lesotho to South Africa emerged as a key factor in relocating to these nations. “I was going to stay for a week;” Masekela remarked to Bernstein about 1980 trip to Lesotho, “and I stayed for three months because I was so close to home.”<sup>125</sup> Soon thereafter he traveled to Botswana and decided to remain there in order to link up with the growing number of artists dotting the border-state, as well as participate in a “Culture and Resistance” festival organized by esteemed South African author Wally Serote and his MEDU Arts Ensemble.<sup>126</sup> In order to preserve his recording career while residing in the country, Masekela set up a mobile recording studio.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 189.

<sup>124</sup> Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 337.

<sup>125</sup> Gwangwa, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 343.

<sup>126</sup> The MEDU Arts Ensemble comprised of various exiled South African artists and sought to connect culture within the anti-apartheid struggle. Their influence is possibly best demonstrated by Serote’s serving as the head of the ANC’s Department of Arts and Culture in exile beginning in 1983 as

Occasionally, performing and residing in Africa also allowed the chance to reconnect with loved ones back in South Africa when such performances took place in neighboring states. During a visit to Mozambique for the nation's independence celebration, Makeba's brother illegally snuck across the South African-Mozambican border to meet up with the sister whom he had not seen for close to two decades. "It [his visit] is like something from a dream," Makeba remarks, "or a moment of warmth in the chill of an exile's nightmare."<sup>128</sup> Masekela did find the chance to reconnect with numerous family members that he had not seen in two decades, including his father and grandmother (whom he lived with for most of his childhood) during his 1980 performance with Makeba in Maseru (Lesotho).<sup>129</sup> These face-to-face reunions could also be problematic. Relatives and friends knew of the Kongers success abroad (or, at least, assumed that one was successful because they were abroad) and often wondered why the exiles did not do more for those still behind in South Africa. Masekela confronted this very problem when his two youngest sisters chided him for leaving "us to rot in this godforsaken South Africa."<sup>130</sup>

None of the Kongers proved as prominent a figure within Africa as Makeba. She very much became a Pan-African superstar with one Guinean representative to the UN

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well the Parliamentary Select Committee for Arts and Culture when the ANC gained control of the South African government during the 1990s. See Wally Serote, interview by Hilda Bernstein, in Hilda Bernstein, ed., *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 332-334; "Profile of Mongane Wally Serote," website for The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, [http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/orders\\_list.asp?show=382](http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/orders_list.asp?show=382) (accessed on January 2, 2009).

<sup>127</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 321-2.

<sup>128</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 195.

<sup>129</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 316-7.

<sup>130</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 318.

describing, according to a 1963 committee report, her as “not only the pride of the South African people, with whom she identified herself, but also the pride of all Africa.”<sup>131</sup> She faced official invitations from the Tanzanian, Kenyan, and Ethiopian governments to visit those places,<sup>132</sup> eventually lived in Guinea, campaigned with Jomo Kenyatta,<sup>133</sup> and even attended the Conference of Heads of African States and Governments.<sup>134</sup> Her wedding reception with Stokely Carmichael took place at the Mount Vernon, New York, residence of Tanzania’s ambassador to the UN while the invitations were “issued by” Guinea’s UN ambassador.<sup>135</sup> She appeared before the United Nations on numerous occasions (the first coming when a Liberian representative invited her to perform for the Trusteeship Committee of the UN’s General Assembly),<sup>136</sup> and even became an official UN diplomat when tapped by Guinea to represent the nation, in hopes that her involvement could publicize Guinea’s struggle for development and South Africa’s liberation struggle, while

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<sup>131</sup> “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 5.

<sup>132</sup> “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 4

<sup>133</sup> Makeba is unclear when she made these appearances but it appears that they took place in 1962 or 1963 as she places them chronologically around Kenya’s independence and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. See Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 127.

<sup>134</sup> “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 4

<sup>135</sup> “Wedding Reception Planned For Stokely Carmichaels,” *The New York Times* (New York), May 18, 1968.

<sup>136</sup> Kathleen Teltsch, “Miriam Makeba, at U.N., Scores South African Race ‘Nightmare,’” *The New York Times* (New York), July 17, 1963; Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 191-2, 199; and “Summary Record of the First Part of the Eighteenth Meeting,” General Assembly of the United Nations’ Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa, July 16, 1963, A/AC.115/SR.18, United Nations, p. 4.

presumably training her as a politician so that South Africa would possess another experienced diplomat once it too gained its independence.<sup>137</sup>

To President Touré's delight, Makeba and Carmichael relocated to Guinea in 1968, and initially their assimilation into local society went well. Makeba toured Africa and regularly performed for dignitaries and distinguished guests of the government. She opened a boutique selling baby clothes in Conakry (despite the nation's strong anti-capitalist leanings).<sup>138</sup> Beyond these roles within Guinea, she was repeatedly asked to appear across Africa as a performer and an informal "cultural ambassador" of Africa.<sup>139</sup> Often she performed at independence celebrations, and that these invitations became so common that she jokes, "It has sort of become a little tradition in Africa: Become free, and have Miriam come and sing."<sup>140</sup> As an ambassador, she regularly welcomed visiting African American celebrities and performers, such as Nina Simone and Abbey Lincoln, to the continent.<sup>141</sup> She even helped arrange for Stevie Wonder's Grammy acceptance speech to be televised-from the 1977 FESTAC festivities in Lagos.<sup>142</sup>

Despite hopes of these exiles, this collective reconnection with the African continent often proved problematic. As South Africans, they were foreigners and often treated as such. Writing about the experience of such performers, Stein notes that most black South African exiles found that:

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<sup>137</sup> "Singer Back in South Africa," *The New York Times* (New York), June 11, 1990.

<sup>138</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 188.

<sup>139</sup> Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder*, 124-5.

<sup>140</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 193

<sup>141</sup> Simone popped into Liberia in 1974 and Lincoln visited Makeba in Guinea a year later. See Barnett, ed., *I Got Thunder*, 124.

<sup>142</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 201-2.

a shock was awaiting them, there was no really happy landfall even in their own continent. Upon stepping ashore they found no arms open wide to receive them as heroes of the black race, but they were treated as if aliens, as if ethnic others—heaven help us, as if they were whites! That was a most hurtful, chilling response, to be branded expatriate, no closer kin than the European conquerors and settlers.<sup>143</sup>

Thus this transition to life in sub-Saharan Africa often never lived up to the expectations of these exiles. Like then exiled Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, Makeba and the growing band of South African exiles (which at times included Masekela) were welcomed to Guinea by and under the protection of President Touré.<sup>144</sup> Despite this treatment, she, like many exiles, was treated as a “stranger” and language barriers plagued her throughout her time living there.<sup>145</sup> Certain cultural differences, such as being unable to attend her grandson’s Islamic funeral since she was a woman, equally irked her.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore President Touré became increasingly involved in Makeba’s personal life, as he attempted to halt Makeba’s divorce of Carmichael (presumably in hopes of preserving the symbol of Pan-African unity) and later personally vetted Makeba’s future husband.<sup>147</sup>

These mixed feelings of being back in Africa but treated as foreigners combined with not being in the Africa that they knew and believed they belonged to caused the Kongers much heartbreak. These feelings and their separation from the land of their birth sent many into depression and some chased away their pain with drugs and alcohol. A hard drinker back in Johannesburg, Todd Matshikiza increasingly turned to alcohol to

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<sup>143</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 190-1.

<sup>144</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 167.

<sup>145</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 169 and 174.

<sup>146</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 209-10.

<sup>147</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 205 and 213-6.



ease his concerns with life in exile and ended up dying of liver cirrhosis in 1968 just four years after arriving in Zambia.<sup>148</sup> It seems that his own reconnecting with Africa proved problematic, as it only further reminded him of his disconnect with his own homeland and culture.

The distressing demise of some Kongers presumably both angered and saddened fellow Kongers. Masekela's documentation of the impact of his last visit with Matshikiza captures such feelings. "During the ride to the airport, I knew I would never see him again. A great musician, pianist, composer, and author, exiled from his country of birth, was waiting to die in a foreign land," writes Masekela remembering his last meeting with Matshikiza, "far from his friends the Manhattan Brothers... and away from Mackay Dvashe, Kippie Moeketsi, and many others who I knew would have walked to Zambia to be his pallbearers... As I looked down on Lusaka from the porthole window of my plane, the thought of Todd Matshikiza in that bed brought tears to my eyes."<sup>149</sup> Beyond the sadness of losing close friends, these deaths presumably forced each to wonder if he or she would become the next exile to die before returning home.

Unlike Matshikiza, Makeba physically survived her exile experience in sub-Saharan Africa. Her recording career in the West, however, faced near-death, as residing in Africa hindered her ability to record albums, tour the West, and widened the chasm between her and the Western audiences that accounted for a large percentage of her album sales. Though she connected culturally to Guinean society and even added

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<sup>148</sup> Stein, *Who Killed Mr. Drum?*, 250.

<sup>149</sup> Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 193-4.

Guinean songs to her sets, Makeba professionally found her international career stifled by the isolation from Western audiences.<sup>150</sup> While she performed frequently within the continent and at official gatherings in Guinea, the nation's remoteness to the major markets within Europe and North America meant that both her career and finances would suffer. After her seven years away without a performance in the States, Makeba believes that American audiences that once "knew me everywhere I went" had largely forgotten about her.<sup>151</sup>

Additionally, the luster of independent Africa faded as civil wars and military coups, failed economies and underdevelopment became the norm. While considering which African nation to relocate to, Masekela's decision was heavily influenced by "war in Mozambique, war in Angola, and war in Zimbabwe" and thus "I opted to go to West Africa where Miriam was living."<sup>152</sup> In 1985, an act of war, the South African Defense Forces' invasion of the ANC's Botswanan outposts and assassination of various activists, came dangerously close to Masekela. The experience apparently forced Masekela to reconsider his relocation to Africa as he swiftly moved back to London.

Likewise Makeba found herself in similarly precarious situation regarding her relationship to her adopted nation of Guinea. Makeba's unique relationship with President Touré and his administration made Makeba a potential target during coup attempts and she even learned how to use a machine gun.<sup>153</sup> Such events further

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<sup>150</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 171.

<sup>151</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 190; and Masekela, *Still Grazing*, 224.

<sup>152</sup> Masekela, interview by Bernstein, in Bernstein, ed., *The Rift*, 343.

<sup>153</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 176-78.

disillusioned the exiles who had relocated in Africa. Consequently, she became disillusioned with life in Africa and longed for a return to her native South Africa.

Writing about her situation in Guinea after a coup attempt, Makeba reflects on these emotions:

Guinea will not be invaded every day, but this scare has shown me that it is an illusion to think that I can find true peace here. This is because Guinea is friendly to me, it is not my home. And true peace can only be found at home.

My home is South Africa. And so I have to ask myself a terrible question: Will I ever find peace in my lifetime? Will I ever go home?<sup>154</sup>

Like Makeba, many of the exiles came to realize that life in their adopted African homelands could never completely fill the void left by being barred from South Africa. For this return, they would need to wait until apartheid's dismantling in the early 1990s.

## **Conclusion**

By 1985, the *King Kong* exiles dotted America, Britain and sub-Saharan Africa. Collectively they struggled to adjust to life abroad and longed to return to South Africa, particularly as their time in exile increased. While the collective outlook regarding their professional and physical well-being was bleak, those who spent significant time in America made a profound impact on American music, how the West viewed Africa and its culture, and the anti-apartheid struggle. As time wore on, these Kongers felt increasingly alienated and agitated by life in the West, and even those who had captured success abroad, such as Masekela and Makeba, found their careers declining by the dawn of the 1980s. It would take the reinvigorated global interest in the anti-apartheid

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<sup>154</sup> Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*, 178.

movement, as well as South African music ushered in by Paul Simon's *Graceland* project, to fully rehabilitate their images within the West.

The stark difference in fates of the Kongers who wound up in Britain as opposed to those who arrived to America is a one hard to comprehend. They all arrived at essentially the same time with similar sounds, performing styles and images. They left South Africa as its preeminent African performers, but the mere fact that some ended up in America as opposed to Britain appears to have dictated how well they would do professionally. The reception of the Kongers within these two societies seemingly says more of the differences between these two societies rather than of the Kongers themselves. In America, the Kongers found a society attempting to reconcile its divisively racist past, and happened upon an era where interest in Africa was piqued. In Britain, they encountered a society just now confronting racial issues in the face of its crumbling empire, and black communities where differences created roadblocks rather than bridges. As a result, those Kongers struggled a great deal and faced a fundamentally different experience throughout their lives in exile.

## Chapter Six

### **“Death Song”: The 1979 *King Kong*(s), Remaking a Legend, and Producing a Disaster**

Roughly twenty years after the 1959 *Kong* met overwhelming praise following its Johannesburg premier, Ian Bernhardt staged a remake of the musical.<sup>1</sup> Unlike its predecessor, however, the remake must be viewed as anything but a success. In-fighting within the play’s management, poor responses to the alterations made to the musical by the play’s director, horrid reviews by both the black and white press, and a threatened lawsuit by Todd Matshikiza’s widow ultimately sank the remake.

This chapter examines the failures of the 1979 restaging of the *King Kong* musical. Since the remake lasted only a few weeks, many view it as a minor and inconsequential moment in South African theatrical history. I disagree with this notion, and argue that reactions from the public and, in particular, the popular press are vital to understanding *King Kong*’s lasting impact on South African society at large. The chapter contends that the remake and the controversies surrounding this version mark the original’s pervasive legacy in popular South African memory as well as how the tastes of black and white audiences had shifted a great deal since 1959. The flood of criticism faced by the remake underscores the importance and remarkable nature of the original production to South African society. Whereas the 1959 version pleased both white and black audiences, the fact that whites largely detested the 1979 remake while black

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhardt was a key organizer behind the original *King Kong*. He also founded Dorkay House, the then-center of training Africans in the performing arts in Johannesburg as the base of operations for the black entertainment union, Union Artists.

theatergoers were more accepting of the restaging points to a divergence in sensibilities and needs of both communities—a divide that became more pronounced by the late 1970s. Therefore it was unfeasible that a *Kong* remake could recapture the energies and excitement spawned by the original while pleasing both white and black audiences.

### **Shifts in Black Drama Since 1959**

By 1979, South Africa had undergone drastic changes since *King Kong*'s premier twenty years earlier. While no one can contend the 1950s was an apolitical or peaceful period in South African history, the political turbulence that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s dwarfed that of the 1950s. In the early 1960s, the apartheid regime banned most black political organizations, such as the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). Their bannings ultimately spurred the formation of liberation armies, such as the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe and the PAC's Poqo, based outside of South Africa's borders. Additionally, political movements drifted away from the multiracial alliances forged decades earlier by the ANC with the rise of Black Consciousness and popular leader Steve Biko. The nation's youth became more politically active, and violence became a more popular means of resisting the apartheid regime (most notably manifested by the Soweto Uprisings of 1976). Together, these developments fundamentally altered the nation's political atmosphere.

Due to such political transformations, the place of the arts in the anti-apartheid struggle had shifted a great deal since *Kong*'s 1959 premiere. Whereas *King Kong*'s staging, its success, and the multiracial character of the endeavor were considered moral

victories in 1959, black art was now expected to be used as weapons and propaganda tools for exposing the atrocities suffered by the majority of South Africans at the hands of the apartheid regime. A black artist—singer, painter or writer—was now expected to give voice to black South Africa’s plight under the apartheid regime, which were manifested from the Umkhonto we Sizwe’s cultural wing, *Amandla* (headed by Jonas Gwangwa, a former Konger and by the 1970s a world renowned trombonist), to the writings of authors like Alex Laguma, Dennis Brutus and Wally Serote.

Beyond these differences in political eras, South African theatre, particularly that performed for and written by blacks, had undergone other major changes since 1959. *King Kong* became the yardstick by which all following theatrical productions were measured by, and set the precedent for black theatrical success. Consequently, the legacies of *King Kong* were profound. In his *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present Day*, David Kerr argues that the “major achievement of *King Kong* was to establish the idea among black entrepreneurial entertainers that a full-length musical drama, based on the vaudeville tradition, could be popular enough with black audiences to be commercially successful.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the original *King Kong* marked the beginning of township theatre, as South African theatre—across races and locations—made major gains after Kong’s South African premier.

Many of the original cast who returned following the UK tour dispersed back into their communities, and often spurred theatre on local levels. Consequently, many

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<sup>2</sup> David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: From Pre-Colonial Times to the Present Day* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1995), 217.

became leading figures in black South African theatrical performance. Caiphus Semenya, Mackay Davashe and Satch Masinga wrote their own musicals. Semenya, Masinga, Letta Mbulu, Sophie Mgcina, Ken Gampu and Abigail Khubeka became actors in addition to being singers, musicians or dancers.<sup>3</sup> Dorkay House and its Union Artists (with its African Music and Drama School run out of Dorkay) produced numerous productions following *Kong* (often using the funds raised by *Kong*'s success) including Western classics, such as *Of Mice and Men* and *Emperor Jones*, and plays set around local themes, such as *Morati of Batatung*, *No Place to Hide*, *Back in Your Own Backyard* and *Umtombinde*. Out of Dorkay, Bernhardt even formed the Phoenix Players, a prominent black Johannesburg theatrical group.

Effectively, *King Kong*'s success promoted black theatre, introduced it to both mainstream black and white audiences, proved that as an avenue of expression could not only be sold but be profitable, and trained a generation of African actors, directors, technicians, and showmen. Athol Fugard, Gibson Kente, Solly Mckgoe, Barney Simon, Rob McLaren (often going by a pen name of Mshengu Kavanagh), Rob Amato, Sam Mhangwane, Boike Mahlamme and various others worked with black actors to produce productions that dealt with "black" issues.<sup>4</sup> Black acting troupes and production teams spawned in the nation's urban centers, such as Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth,

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<sup>3</sup> Though his fame cannot not be directly credited to *King Kong*, Gampu's involvement with the production certainly did not retard or damage his career.

<sup>4</sup> Though Simon, Amato, McLaren and Fugard are white, they worked a great deal with South African actors and fundamentally shaped black South African theatre.



Johannesburg and Soweto.<sup>5</sup> Other signposts of black theatre's growth included the featuring of theatre in black festivals, the establishment of Johannesburg's Market Theatre in 1976 and *S'ketsh: South Africa's Magazine for Theatre and Entertainment* was formed in 1972.<sup>6</sup> As a result of all these efforts, South African theatre was now producing a large stable of qualified, skilled and talented black actors, directors and playwrights.

Despite these achievements, *Kong's* most enduring impact may be the establishment of the "African" musical format, which was appropriated and adopted throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Follow *Kong's* format, these musicals, such as *Ipi Tombi*, *Sponono* and *Phiri*, aimed at capturing the vibrancy of African life (albeit often an oversimplified, romantic vision of African life that placed Africans in rural settings) while pairing it with Southern Africa's strong music and dance traditions. Kerr contends, "[*King Kong*] paved the way for a tradition of musicals which were financed, written and directed by whites, but which exploited, often to the point of shameless plagiarism, the talents of black singers, dancers and musicians."<sup>7</sup>

The most successful of this genre was *Ipi Tombi*. While *King Kong* was widely considered a hit, *Ipi Tombi* enjoyed even greater success, despite the fact that most black South Africans did not identify with or support the production. By 1981, seven companies of *Ipi Tombi* had been formed and close to six million people had seen the

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<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that Semenya and Mbulu did migrate to America in 1965. See John S. Wilson, "2 More From 'King Kong' Cast Arrive," *New York Times* (New York), January 1, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> *S'ketsh's* full title is rather misleading as though *S'ketsh* did cover a variety of forms of entertainment, its primary focus was on black theatre.

<sup>7</sup> Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, 217.

show, from Nigeria to the United States to Australia. The show had won the Las Vegas Best Revue Award, and the London production lasted for over four years.<sup>8</sup> Few “African” musicals directed or created by Africans can be considered successful commercial enterprises, and the most famous of “African” musicals, in the words of Andersson, “all seem to be produced by well-to-do whites.”<sup>9</sup>

It must be noted, however, that the definition of the “African” musical has repeatedly been contested as different groups (ethnic, racial and political) possessed different, often conflicting, definitions of these musicals. African musicals were often avenues for, in the words of Andersson, “propaganda about black people being happy-go-lucky child-like clowns who love to sing and dance... that it’s little wonder all the real issues are obscured.... These musicals are probably one of the most efficient propaganda tools the government has. Ipi Tombi promotes tribalism, as well as the image of the black person in South Africa as happy, rhythmical and content.”<sup>10</sup> Agreeing with Andersson, Kerr further describes these endeavors “as a scarcely disguised apology for the Bantustan policy.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, South African opinions concerning the genre generally digressed along racial lines, with whites enjoying them and Africans predominantly detesting them.

Despite *Ipi Tombi* being the most recognizable and profitable South African musical (until the 1980s production of *Sarafina!*), it was not the only “African” musical

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<sup>8</sup> Muff Andersson, *Music in the Mix: The Story of South African Popular Music* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), 101.

<sup>9</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 99-100.

<sup>11</sup> Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, 217.

since *Kong*. Some dealt with and projected the harsh realities of black life in South Africa's townships. Andersson contends, "There *have* been authentic 'African' musicals, such as Shimane Solly Mekgoe's *Lindiwe*, some of the earlier works of Gibson Kente (more recent ones like *Mama and the Load* tend to be very Broadway inspired) and many other obscure shows."<sup>12</sup>

Andersson's aforementioned remark concerning the "African" nature of Kente's works demonstrates the problematic nature of defining what is African. While *King Kong*, widely considered as an "African" musical that was directed, produced, choreographed and written by whites, attempted to be a South African version or mixture of *West Side Story* and *Porgy and Bess*, Kente's productions were often directed, produced, written and choreographed by Kente, himself a Xhosa. These plays dealt with topics identifying with black South Africans, but are not considered "African" by some scholars. Not all, however, shared this opinion, and Andersson quotes record producer West Nkosi as stating, "As far as I'm concerned the only true black musical was the first *King Kong*, with the exception of Gibson Kente's *Sikalo*, about blacks living Pimville. It was about the struggle of blacks. Most blacks I know don't like *Ipi Tombi*. Bertha Egnos takes a little bit of what she knows about blacks and puts it in."<sup>13</sup> Though not directly in the scope of this chapter, these examples epitomize the fierce ideological contests over authenticity that often pervaded South African theatre of the 1960s and 1970s.

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<sup>12</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Muff Andersson's *Music in the Mix*, 99.

Those productions that were deemed “African” enough by black audiences, however, often failed to popularly reach white theatre audiences. As South African society became increasingly divided along racial lines throughout the 1960s and 1970s, so too did audience appreciation of local theatre. Such splits were apparent in the 1972 production of *Phiri*, which like the original *King Kong* featured a white director (Barney Simon) but featured an African cast (including a number of former participants from *King Kong*). White audiences failed to latch onto this production while it “attracted a good following” from black ones. “The show opened to white audiences at the Witwatersrand University,” writes Coplan, “but patronising, ethnocentric theatre critics like Percy Baneshik failed to comprehend or appreciate the tragicomedy, earthiness, physicality, visible emotionality, and episodic structure that are the soul of African drama.”<sup>14</sup>

### **An African American Directing an African Experience**

With so much anticipation surrounding a *Kong* remake, Bernhardt and the production’s financial backers needed a director who would not only drum up domestic interest but, perhaps more importantly, would be conducive to the possibility of the remake touring abroad (where the play’s investors could find major financial returns to their investment). Assuming that *Kong* would succeed locally, Bernhardt and his

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<sup>14</sup> David Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa’s Black City Music and Theatre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 282.

investors sought to bring the show abroad following the domestic tour, a trend now common for successful musicals (i.e. *Sponono* and *Ipi Tombi*).<sup>15</sup>

Kente's success both in appealing to black audiences and in the African musical genre conceivably should have made him a logical, possibly ideal, choice. Regardless of how "African" his productions were perceived, Kente emerged as the most prominent and influential black figure in theatre inside of South Africa between the 1960s and 1970s. In taking early apprenticeship positions with Union Artists and working as a talent scout and songwriter for local record labels, Kente absorbed an in-depth knowledge of the inner-workings of local showbiz and theatre.<sup>16</sup> Producing over 20 plays over his career—but best known for his plays *Sikalo*, *Life*, *Manana the Jazz Prophet*, *Zwi* and *Mama and the Load* in addition to the film *How Long (Must We Suffer?)*—his productions were "inspired by township life" and usually followed a formula similar to the *Kong* format in that they were musicals dealing with common township experiences.<sup>17</sup> By the late 1960s, his production company played to sizeable audiences throughout the country but, in particular, Soweto, where his musicals thrived despite a limited number of suitable venues. South African ethnomusicologist Lara Allen notes, for instance, that Kente often staged productions "in converted beer halls, township halls,

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<sup>15</sup> Abbey Maine, "An African Theater in South Africa," *African Arts*, Volume 3, Number 4 (Summer 1970): 44.

<sup>16</sup> Kente, for instance, wrote songs like "Inkomo Zodwa" and "Sindiza nge Cadillacs" for Miriam Makeba and her group, the Skylarks and "Somandla" for the Manhattan Brothers. See Miriam Makeba with Nomsa Mwamuka, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 41; and Joe Mogotsi with Pearl Connor, *Mantindane, "He Who Survives": My Life with The Manhattan Brothers* (Copenhagen: The Booktrader, 2002), 159.

<sup>17</sup> Lara Allen, "Introduction: South African Women of Song, their Lives and Time," in Z.B. Molefe and Mike Mzileni, *A Common Hunger to Sing: A Tribute to South Africa's Black Women of Song, 1950 to 1990* (Johannesburg: Kwela Books, 1997), 5.

and cinemas.”<sup>18</sup> Often producing, writing, directing, choreographing and even starring in his musicals, Kente was a driving force—if not the driving force—in black South African theatre, despite being overshadowed abroad by Fugard’s success on world stages.

By the 1960s, however, Kente grew weary of Union Artists and Ian Bernhardt early on in his career. This rift between him and the union appears to be the main reason for Bernhardt overlooking Kente as a candidate for director of the production. In addition to this feud, there were various other reasons for Bernhardt exclusion of Kente. By now a veteran of theatrical production and promotion through Dorkay House and its Phoenix Players, Bernhardt presumably possessed his own vision of what a *King Kong* remake should sound and look like. Therefore he was presumably unwilling to relinquish control to the now prominent Kente. This sort of hesitance to give control to directors remained consistent with Bernhardt, as following the *Kong* remake’s bombing, the *Rand Daily Mail* noted that “from the start he [Bernhardt] didn’t like the idea of a playwright directing his work.”<sup>19</sup> For a major internationally known director, Bernhardt would be forced to make such concessions.<sup>20</sup> For a local director/playwright, on the other hand, it seems likely that Bernhardt could not fathom granting such liberties.<sup>21</sup>

Lastly, as Kente became more politically active by the mid-1970s, his works, such as *How Long*, were banned by the South African regime. While the political nature of his plays endeared him to liberation movements (as well as the black population at large), it

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<sup>18</sup> Allen, “Introduction: South African Women of Song, their Lives and Time,” in Molefe and Mzileni, *A Common Hunger to Sing*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “‘King Kong’ went all wrong,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 7, 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Walker both directed and rewrote *Kong*.

<sup>21</sup> Sipho Sepamla, “King Kong,” *S’ketsh*, Winter 1979: 6.

also made him a target for the South African security forces, and presumably posed logistical problems in involving him in such a production. Thus Kente's political views may have further established Kente as an undesirable candidate to direct the *Kong* remake in Bernhardt's eyes.<sup>22</sup> For if this *King Kong* would travel abroad, it would once again need the cooperation of the national authorities in regards to securing passports.

Despite looking past Kente, Bernhardt and the *Kong* investors did explore various local and international choices for the project's director, and it appears that the group did not initially seek out the remake's eventual director Joseph A. Walker. The *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the play's investors explored tapping Fatimah "Fats" Dike, a well-known playwright from Cape Town, for the director of the *King Kong* remake.<sup>23</sup> According to *S'ketsh* editor Sipho Sepamla, Bernhardt did persuade Dike to rewrite the *Kong* script eight months before the remake's premiere, but she left due to "a break-down that had to do with her terms for the job."<sup>24</sup> Aiming for a "name" known to both local and international audience, the investment group decided on Krishna Shah, an internationally known Indian director who had been in South Africa previously producing *King of the Dark Chamber* and Alan Paton's *Sponono*.<sup>25</sup> Restrictions imposed on the apartheid regime by the Indian government, however, prevented Shah from accepting the

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<sup>22</sup> "Farewell Message to Mr Gibson Kente," November 11, 2004, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/zuma/2004/jz1111.html> (Accessed on March 20, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Bob Hitchcock, "'King Kong' went all wrong," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 7, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Sipho Sepamla, "King Kong," *S'ketsh*, Winter 1979, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Abbey Maine, "An African Theater in South Africa," *African Arts*, Volume 3, Number 4 (Summer 1970): 44.

offer. Knowing Walker from directing the film version of *The River Niger*, Shah suggested that Bernhardt seek out Walker to rewrite and ultimately direct *Kong*.

By 1979, Joseph A. Walker was a “name” and quite significant figure in American theatre. Opening in early December 1972, his *The River Niger* played “to capacity audiences almost every performance since it opened.”<sup>26</sup> Originally staged “off Broadway” by the Negro Ensemble Company at the St. Marks Playhouse in New York City (where it ran for 120 performances),<sup>27</sup> *The River Niger* faced widespread success and it was later transferred to the Brooks Atkinson Theater, an “On Broadway” venue.<sup>28</sup> The production ran on Broadway for eight months and was performed 280 times.<sup>29</sup> With *Niger*, Walker won a Tony Award for Best Play in 1973<sup>30</sup> and split an Obie Award for the play of the year (1972-3) with Lanford Wilson’s “The Hot L Baltimore.”<sup>31</sup> In addition, the play won Walker the Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award, which theatrical scholar Stanley Richards describes as “presented to the playwright whose work produced within each year dealt with controversial subjects involving fields of political, religious or social mores of the time,” and a Drama Desk citation for “most promising

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<sup>26</sup> Mel Gussow, “Negro Ensemble Finds Hit Play Poses Problem,” *New York Times* (New York), February 7, 1973.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley Richards, “Joseph A. Walker,” in Stanley Richards, ed., *The Tony Winners: A Collection of Ten Exceptional Plays, Winners of the Tony Award for the Most Distinguished Play of the Year*, 837.

<sup>28</sup> “‘Niger’ and ‘Play’ Off to Broadway” in “Briefs on the Arts,” *New York Times* (New York), March 13, 1973.

<sup>29</sup> Richards, “Joseph A. Walker,” in Richards, ed., *The Tony Winners*, 837.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Berkvist, “Theatre Notes: Is Off Broadway Finished?,” *New York Times* (New York), April 27, 1975.

<sup>31</sup> “‘The Hot L Baltimore’ Shares Obie Award With ‘River Niger,’” *New York Times* (New York), May 23, 1973.



playwright.”<sup>32</sup> The play’s success ultimately spurred a cinematic version directed by Shah and starred such notable black actors as James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson and Lou Gossett, Jr. Though largely considered a flop, the mere facts that a film was made based around the play and did feature some top African American actors further demonstrate Walker’s success with *The River Niger*.

Though views on Walker’s involvement would later change following the *King Kong* remake’s box office bombing, bringing Walker in to direct and rewrite *Kong* must have been initially considered nothing short of a coup by the play’s backers, and his involvement in remaking a legendary South African play caused quite a stir and anticipation in local theatrical circles. By 1979, patrons of black theatre were aware of Walker’s success, as a 1973 issue of *S’ketsh* featured an interview with Douglas Turner-Ward, star of *The River Niger* and co-founder of the Negro Ensemble Company.<sup>33</sup>

By 1979, Walker was a black director who had already achieved significant fame; his work had received the highest success on the grandest of stages, and he had an extensive background in acting and directing. Entrenched in America’s black acting/directing elite, Walker ran in social circles that included the likes of Gossett, Jr. and Amiri Baraka. He also made several appearances as an actor in various stage, television and film productions, including an appearance as a black militant in Woody Allen’s film, *Bananas*. With the Negro Ensemble Company in 1970, he “presented” *The*

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<sup>32</sup> Richards, “Joseph A. Walker” in Richards, ed., *The Tony Winner*, 838.

<sup>33</sup> “Interview with Douglas Turner-Ward,” *S’Ketsh*, Summer 1973, 14-15.

*Harangues* as well as wrote, choreographed and staged a musical entitled *Ododo*.<sup>34</sup> In addition to his career as an actor and director, he possessed a strong background in teaching theatre (he previously taught throughout the New York City and Washington, D.C. areas, and was as well a playwright-in-residence at Yale University), which presumably only further convinced Bernhardt that Walker could provide further training to the USAA's actors.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in short, Walker's experience and expertise presumably had all those back in South Africa believing that they found the right man to restage *King Kong*.

While this chapter is no place to fully analyze Walker's career, there are certain key attributes and themes of Walker's career that provide insight to his mindset and directing approach to both *King Kong* and South Africa. First of all, themes of Afrocentricity and black pride ran throughout Walker's previous works. *The River Niger*, *Ododo* (Yoruba for "truth"), *The Harangues* and *District Line* either touch or focus on the impact of slavery or imperial rule on black peoples throughout the world. This interest in Africa stemmed from as far back as his undergraduate days at Howard University. Although he majored in philosophy at Howard, he admittedly "loved [his] African Studies program" and he later pursued a Ph.D. in African Studies from his alma mater.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Richards, "Joseph A. Walker," in Richards, ed., *The Tony Winners*, 839.

<sup>35</sup> Richards, "Joseph A. Walker," in Richards, ed., *The Tony Winners*, 839.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Bosworth, "'We Start Out Loving Everybody,'" *New York Times* (New York), December 31, 1972.

Furthermore, a key underlying theme of *The River Niger* is the idea of revolution undertaken by African Americans and black South Africans. The love interest of one of the play's primary characters is a black South African, whose father was imprisoned after refusing to turn over his politically active sons to the apartheid security forces. By drawing from the similarities between the black South African and black American experiences, Walker sought to connect the two struggles. Furthermore, we see that Walker was already formulating commonalities and connections between both black "revolutions" as early as 1972. As a result, it appears that he found himself drawn to the anti-apartheid struggle and his perception of a shared common experience between black South Africa and black America presumably attracted Walker to the project of directing a production in South Africa.

Another motive to hire Walker was that his presence could possibly dissuade fears of foreign audiences' acceptance of a production from South Africa. Presumably, they could not deem the venture exploitative if an African American director with a reputation for black liberation were heading the production. Therefore such a production could avoid the controversies, protests, and general backlash faced by *Ipi Tombi* and *Sponono* overseas. One *Sunday Times* reviewer intimated such reasoning and remarked that the 1979 *King Kong* "could gain entrée to Broadway more easily without the taint of white South African participation."<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, there were a number of reasons why Walker may not be considered an ideal choice. Though his political and artistic views possibly meshed well

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<sup>37</sup> Len Ashton, "Anatomy of a FLOP," *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), April 29, 1979.

with the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s, he was perhaps too militant for most white South Africans regardless of political leaning. These beliefs are best captured in an article, entitled “Broadway’s Vitality is Black Vitality,” published in the *New York Times* on August 5, 1973. Responding to a previous article examining the state of Broadway theatre at the time, Walker attacked the author for his “nostalgic” views on the then current state of Broadway. Walker wrote:

I’m positive that Mr. Kerr did not take out a blue pencil and cross off... the Black films which bring rivers of Black folk to the Broadway area, or the musical “Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope,” which is still holding its own, or “The River Niger,” which lovely rivers of Black folk are streaming to see at the Brooks Atkinson. There is, however, a subterranean prejudice implied by Mr. Kerr’s article and this prejudice finds its source in the deep, dank corners of white supremacy. Or does Mr. Kerr make his way through the rivers of Black folk who inundate Broadway – particularly on weekends – with blinders on?<sup>38</sup>

Through Walker’s writing, it is abundantly clear that he believed that the white American establishment was slow to recognize the major strides made by black actors and playwrights as well as the fact that black audiences were now a key component of New York theatergoers. For Bernhardt to not know ahead of time that his own politics would not mesh with Walker’s demonstrates that Bernhardt may not have done a sound background check on Walker.

Despite Walker’s apparent sympathy for the struggle waged by black South Africa in 1970s, as well as his success and experience, not all local black directors and playwrights were pleased with the hiring of an outsider to direct *King Kong*, which by now had acquired a near legendary position with black South African theatre. Due to growth in local theatre, many believed that a black South African should head the play’s

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph A. Walker, “Broadway’s Vitality Is Black Vitality,” *New York Times* (New York), August 5, 1973.

direction and any revisions of script. Consequently, Bernhardt and his backers took a major risk by hiring a foreigner to head the *King Kong* remake. *Sket'sh*'s Sepamla noted, "[s]omething [that] I know galled me from the start was to hear that an outsider was to direct the play." As a result, some claimed that Bernhardt abandoned the struggle for black theatre's growth, as Sepamla continued:

It seems to me all the years he's [Ian Bernhardt] spent with black people in this country have taught him nothing of our feelings and aspirations. With one stroke he's exposed a basic weakness in his claims. For over the years he has said he wanted to uplift the black artist. This has been the purpose of his involvement in the first place. He gets the biggest break-through in this field and what does he do? He goes overseas to look for 'qualified' personnel to do a job which have been done very well by a creative team. He ignores the lesson of the original: the very fact that a lot can be achieved by a creative team. One has merely to recall how many people were involved in the original KK. I ask why couldn't Ian have called Gibson Kente, Benjy Francis, Connie Mabaso, David Phetoe and Barney Simon to a round table and told them there's a job waiting. And it must be done bloody well.<sup>39</sup>

Many in black South African theatre shared similar feelings, and much to their chagrin Bernhardt tapped a foreigner as a director to this classic of South African drama.

With Walker came his wife, Dorothy Dinroe-Walker as *Kong*'s music director. Possessing a bachelor's degree in music from Howard University in Washington, DC,<sup>40</sup> Dinroe-Walker wrote the music for the 1967 Off Broadway production entitled "The Believers" and "the incidental music" for *Niger*.<sup>41</sup> Following *Niger*, the husband-wife team formed an acting-dancing-singing troupe called the Demi-Gods,<sup>42</sup> which staged

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<sup>39</sup> Sipho Sepamla, "King Kong," *S'ketsh*, Winter 1979, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 102. I believe that her possessing a degree from Howard should not be understated as many black South Africans knew respected Howard, often considering it a premier black university since the 1950s when *Drum* magazine frequently featured the university starting in May 1952 with "American NEGRO UNIVERSITY[:] Washington's Howard University has a World-wide Reputation." See "American NEGRO UNIVERSITY," *Drum* (Johannesburg), May 1952.

<sup>41</sup> The play ran for eight months and starred Joe Walker.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Bosworth, "'We Start Out Loving Everybody,'" *New York Times* (New York), December 31, 1972.

“Yin Yang” with the Negro Ensemble Company in the spring of 1973. Interestingly enough, while South African critics repeatedly ripped Dottie Walker’s music contribution to Kong, her music for “Ying Yang” received more positive criticism than her husband from one *New York Times* critic.<sup>43</sup> As a result, it appears that her credentials were not fairly credited by the South African critics or scholars, such as Andersson, who claims that she possessed “a number of [previously] obscure productions”— despite Dinroe-Walker’s rather impressive résumé.<sup>44</sup>

Once brought to South Africa, *King Kong*’s organizers provided the Walkers with much creative license and the freedom to stray from the original book, as the Walkers’ version varied quite differently from the 1959 original. Unlike the 1959 production, which emphasized local jazz music and celebrated 1950s Sophiatown, the 1979 version stressed “King Kong” being an African hero who defied the apartheid state.<sup>45</sup> Walker, whose previous works often stressed, analyzed or even celebrated black masculinity, felt that Bloom’s book greatly underdeveloped Dlamini as a character, and thus he set out to identify the man behind the myth. Walker objected to Bloom’s depicting “King Kong” as a ruthless, confused and angry bully. “It seems a pity that Walker decided to ignore one aspect of the truth behind the legend. The streak of gangsterism would not have made the man’s strengths any less honourable,” a critic for the *Rand Daily Mail* remarked of the 1979 version, “and to reach for the truth never decreases the inherent drama of a

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<sup>43</sup> Mel Gussow, “Stage: ‘Yin Yang’ Opens,” *New York Times* (Johannesburg), May 31, 1973.

<sup>44</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> King Kong advertisement.

character or situation.”<sup>46</sup> This representation of Dlamini was precisely the image that Walker rejected. He claimed to have conducted numerous interviews with those who knew Dlamini and therefore boasted that he possessed a hefty respect for the man behind the legend. In an interview with *S’ketsh*, Walker stated:

I had fallen in love with this man as a stronger physical counterpart of myself.... The thing that intrigued me about this play is the same thing that has intrigued me about Malcolm X, Nat Turner, Shaka, Muhammed (sic) Ali, Martin Luther King.... He was saying I am a man and such I am going to conduct myself thus and so, thus and so and I don’t care who you are – whether you are black, blue, polka dotted, green or tiddly pink. I am going to be who I am regardless.<sup>47</sup>

By comparing Dlamini, a widely repudiated bully and convicted murderer, to the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, it appears that Walker had formed an image of “King Kong” that presented him as a defiant hero and that he strove to insert this imagery into his rewriting of the musical. This depiction was therefore fundamentally different from that of the 1959 version.

Walker’s changes, as a result, were profound and he moved considerably away from the original’s framework. Whereas the original served as a celebration of township culture and a multiracial collaboration, this new version began in rural Zululand and presented Dlamini as a dignified African frustrated by the unjust system of apartheid rather than an oafish brute terrorizing his community. The advertisements in local newspapers reflected this mentality as they proclaimed “Kong” to be “A Proper Man.” These adverts also featured the image of a man with a spear in his left hand and a boxing

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<sup>46</sup> Rina Minervini, “Now we’ve got a show,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 9, 1979.

<sup>47</sup> “Conversation with Joe Walker,” *S’ketsh*, Winter 1979, 5.

glove on the other hand lifted above the figure's head, which may or may not have been a nod to the black power sentiments of the 1970s.<sup>48</sup>

### **Redoing a “Sensational African music drama”**

With a major African American director and playwright at the helm as well as the still present nostalgia for the original, Bernhardt and his team envisioned this version of *Kong* recapturing the energy and excitement surrounding the original, which in turn would translate into high financial returns. This belief is best demonstrated by the fact the play's five investors<sup>49</sup> sank an estimated total of 200,000 Rand into the musical's revival,<sup>50</sup> a substantial amount considering the Walkers were “paid living expenses of R1 600 a month” and given free use of a car,<sup>51</sup> and that the exchange rate between the Rand and US dollar was 1.815 on April 23, 1979.<sup>52</sup>

Sensing the need to ease the Walkers' transition into domestic theatre, the production team sought out established South African actors and musicians to serve as assistants and advisers. Most notably, Corney Mabaso served as assistant director to Walker.<sup>53</sup> Also a schoolteacher, Mabaso was a veteran of South African theatre as both an actor and director, and had worked with the likes of Athol Fugard. Interestingly,

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<sup>48</sup> Tonight! Section, *The Star* (Johannesburg), April 23, 1979.

<sup>49</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “‘King Kong’ went all wrong,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 7, 1979.

<sup>50</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “Why King Kong was knocked out,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1979; and Anderson, *Music in the Mix*, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “Why King Kong was knocked out,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1979.

<sup>52</sup> “Foreign Exchange,” *The Wall Street Journal* (New York), April 23, 1979.

<sup>53</sup> Efforts were made to interview Mabaso. Unfortunately, we could not set up a time for an interview and I hope to interview him when I return to South Africa.



Mabaso was quite critical of the African musical genre and once told *S'ketsh* that “[black playwrights should] throw away these Soweto musicals [*sic*] recipes and write with our eyes off the box office...”<sup>54</sup> Despite these critiques, he signed on with the production, presumably either being unable to pass up the opportunity to work with Walker, eagerness to work on the legendary *King Kong* or simply needing the possible acclaim and earnings that potentially came with involvement in a major production.

Despite taking these steps to incorporate established South Africans in the endeavor, the *Kong* team apparently made little effort to include former original cast members in the production. Both Abigail Kubeka and Thandi Klaasen claim that no one affiliated with the production approached them to be a part of the 1979 version.<sup>55</sup> Outside of casting Ben “Satch” Masinga as Kong’s manager, few other Kongers were included in the remake and particularly none of the original cast members with key roles. The decision by either Bernhardt or Walker to bypass these established performers remains puzzling and perhaps may have been an attempt to actively distance this production from the original.

Instead of casting a prominent local for the lead role of “King Kong,” the production brought in Eddie Tagoe, a young, burly and muscular Ghanaian actor. Though he would later appear in various Hollywood movies, Tagoe had only appeared in a handful of films at this point in his career and was relatively unknown to South African

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<sup>54</sup> “Interview: Corney Mabaso,” *S'ketsh*, Summer 1975, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Author’s personal conversations with both singers.

audiences.<sup>56</sup> This point further alienated those within local black theatre, as Sepamla suggested that directors discovered Tagoe in a beer commercial.<sup>57</sup>

Opposite Tagoe, Mara Louw played Joyce,<sup>58</sup> the play's female lead.<sup>59</sup> By 1979, Louw had proven herself as a significant South African singer and actress having been involved with *Meropa*, a musical by Caiphus Semenya, in 1973, toured with the production on its Asian tour, and returned to South Africa in 1976.<sup>60</sup> Allen identifies *Meropa* as Louw's "big break," suggesting that she was no lightweight in South African theatre by 1979. Besides Tagoe, Louw and Masinga, other principal actors included David Phetoe (Kong's manager), Harriet Matiwane and Freddy Gumede (a young King Kong). The multiracial "Spirits Rejoice," which Andersson describes as a "superb jazz band," served as the musical's band.<sup>61</sup>

Opening up a week behind schedule, *King Kong*'s premiere took place at His Majesty's Theatre in downtown Johannesburg in late April.<sup>62</sup> The remaking of this classic within South African theatre spurred feelings of anticipation and enthusiasm for

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<sup>56</sup> Tagoe later would appear in numerous Hollywood movies, such as 1981's *Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark* (where he appeared as a pirate), 1982's *Pink Floyd The Wall*, 1984's *Top Secret* (as "Chocolate Mousse"-a black Frenchman in the French underground in WWII) and 1985's *Baby: The Lost Legend*. Coincidentally, he also played the bongos for Matata, the Afro-funk band that Joe Mogotsi's talent agency helped promote during the 1970s. While it may be possible, it does not seem likely that this connection helped Tagoe land the role of "King Kong." See Mogotsi, *Mantindane*, 93.

<sup>57</sup> Sepamla, "King Kong," *S'ketsh*, Winter 1979, 7.

<sup>58</sup> The character of Joyce was played by Miriam Makeba in the 1959 original and Peggy Phango during the UK tour. Due to bannings and their political affiliations, it neither of these women would have been allowed to return to South Africa to play this role.

<sup>59</sup> Attempts to interview Louw were made but Louw decided she did not want to participate with this research project.

<sup>60</sup> "Mara Louw," in Molefe and Mzileni, *A Common Hunger to Sing*, pages not numbered.

<sup>61</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 102-3.

<sup>62</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 102.

local audiences, both white and black. The excitement around the production was understandable as it was the play's first South African performance since the original cast's departure for the United Kingdom in 1961.

*Kong's* revival also meant a renaissance of sorts for those tied to the original 1959 production. On April 23, 1979, the *Rand Daily Mail*, for instance, published a feature on Pat Williams, who returned from her "adopted England" to see the *Kong* revival. She, however, was involved little in the project, as the paper noted that "[s]he flew in last week on an almost finished project and is fascinated to see 'how much more professional everyone has become.'" Though Williams added that her songs sound "like old friends," these "old friends" had been changed considerably. Williams, as a result, did express hesitancy in the changes to the play's score, as she told the *Rand Daily Mail*, "I am very attached to the old [songs] but I do know that the music has to have the feel of now rather than then."<sup>63</sup> Sensing that apprehension on Williams's part that Walker's *Kong* would not meet the expectations, the newspaper continued:

Pat, like the others involved with the new production which she describes as much more professional than the original[, ] hopes that audiences will not come to the show hoping to see exactly what they saw 20 years ago.

"We would like to have a hatstand in the foyer with a sign, saying 'leave your memories here'"<sup>64</sup>

By distancing the remake from the original production, it appears Williams was attempting to help Bernhardt warn South Africans that this version was indeed a very different *King Kong*, and thereby diminish the public's expectations of reliving their

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<sup>63</sup> Pat Schwartz, "The revival of a musical legend," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 23, 1979.

<sup>64</sup> Pat Schwartz, "The revival of a musical legend," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 23, 1979.

memories from the 1959 classic. These warnings went unheeded, and many audience members found themselves shocked and outraged by this very different *King Kong*.

The anticipation surrounding the remake did not blind critics to the alterations made by Walker and his wife. The popular white press, in particular, reacted negatively to these changes. Aghast, one *Rand Daily Mail* reviewer pondered, “How can anything with so much love behind it, so many wishes for its success, go so wrong?” He further added:

It has been more than 20 years since “King Kong” opened in Johannesburg to the city’s astonished delight, a major hit destined for world acclaim.

The news that it was to be revived sent a buzz of excitement through the air, which built up until last night. And now, I think, it is silent.<sup>65</sup>

This type of reaction was typical for white theatre critics and fans. “To sit there and watch this insulting travesty of the original was a nightmare. It was the only occasion when I rejoiced in a show’s failure,” Percy Tucker writes of his reaction reaction to *King Kong*’s 1979 revival.

Much to the dismay of most critics and much of the audience, *Kong*’s music differed greatly from the original score. One member of the audience remarked, “Take *Porgy and Bess*. It remains the same whether it is played in New York, London or Johannesburg. Why change our type of music?”<sup>66</sup> One such change enacted by Dinroe-Walker was to shorten certain songs, which the *Rand Daily Mail* described as, “20-

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<sup>65</sup> Rina Minervini, “A defeat for comeback Kong,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 26, 1979.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted from Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 103.

second cacophonies which were almost unrecognisable.”<sup>67</sup> By changing these by now classic South African tunes, Dinroe-Walker threatened the personal memories of the many within the public who witnessed and cherished the original’s score, for which nostalgia remained strong even in 1979. One critic, a fan of the original score, commented, “[T]heatre lovers of the late 50s and early 60s who can’t carry a tune and don’t know a leap from the splits can still tell you about ‘King Kong brave as a lion... King Kong champ without trying’ and remember fondly the lyrical goings on back of the Moon.”<sup>68</sup>

It is crucial to point out that though critics reacted strongly to the Dinroe-Walker’s changes to the original *Kong* score, it did seem reasonable to bring a twenty-year-old musical up-to-date, particularly if Walker wanted to present his own conception of the play. Considering the vast changes in black South African music, such as the rise of groups like the more traditional sounds of Malombo or American-styled pop songs, one could argue that these changes were necessary. Moreover, few, if any, members of the original cast and band were performing the same styles of music that they performed in 1959.<sup>69</sup> By 1979, Hugh Masekela, for instance, had himself delved deep into experimental jazz, R&B and Afro-beat genres being influenced by musicians ranging from The Beatles to Fela Ransome-Kuti. Therefore altering the score was not as

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<sup>67</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “The King Kong players are singing it again,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979

<sup>68</sup> Pat Schwartz, “The revival of a musical legend,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 23, 1979.

<sup>69</sup> Malombo and similar groups moved away from typical township jazz formats by infusing more traditional styles of music with guitar and drum playing.

unfathomable an idea contended by critics and later scholars. “The new ‘King Kong’ cannot and must not be blamed for being a different production, even a rewritten one, aimed at the Seventies and not the Fifties,” asserted one reviewer.<sup>70</sup> This reviewer, on the other hand, could excuse the production “for being confused, untidy, and lame – even if there are a few, just a few, splendid moments.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite possessing a boxer-like physique, Tagoe possessed little else to endear himself to local audiences. Reviews of his performance were almost entirely negative. Unlike other cast members, Tagoe was not a trained singer and this particularly rubbed Johannesburg audiences the wrong way. It appears that audiences still craved the singing performance and ability of Dambuza Mdledle’s depiction of “Kong,” as one reviewer described the actor’s singing as “beneath comment.”<sup>72</sup>

Black audiences, in particular, may not have been willing to accept or back a non-South African as “King Kong,” the Sophiatown legend. Part of the 1959 version’s success lay in the casting of local singing legends as the play’s leads.<sup>73</sup> Passing up established South African actors for a virtually unknown Ghanaian caused resentment by many local patrons of theatre. Angered at Tagoe’s casting as “Kong,” Sepamla lamented, “Would Satch Masinga not have made a success of the part? Prejudice. Petty politics.

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<sup>70</sup> Rina Minervini, “A defeat for comeback Kong,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 26, 1979.

<sup>71</sup> Rina Minervini, “A defeat for comeback Kong,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 26, 1979.

<sup>72</sup> R.J. Grieg, *The Star* (Johannesburg, Star Tonight! section, April 26, 1979).

<sup>73</sup> There may have been arguments made on behalf of Bernhardt and his investors that no local actor could handle the role of “King Kong.” See Sepamla, “King Kong,” *S’ketsh*, Winter 1979, 7.

That's what robbed Satch of the part."<sup>74</sup> In a play that included local slang as well as two songs in isiZulu from the original score, Tagoe was miscast. Sepamla's criticism concerning a non-South African actor playing "Kong" is particularly interesting as it represents a seeming reversal from the African press in 1961 that welcomed the prospect of Harry Belafonte replacing Mdledle as "Kong" for the much rumored *Kong* performances on Broadway in 1961.

Unlike Tagoe, Louw's performance received mixed praise. The *Rand Daily Mail* remarked, "Mara Louw is one of the production's assets, strong and sure as a singer, effectively stylised as an actress. Her performance is more successful overall than that of the lead, Eddie Tagoe."<sup>75</sup> Such acclaim for her or any other member of the production, however, were drowned out by the overwhelming criticism of virtually everyone else involved in the production.

For the white press, a confrontational and foreign director drastically deviating from the local classic by Bloom and Matshikiza that they still warmly remembered was unacceptable. Many could even still recall the chorus lines from the play's popular songs, and the critics proceeded to harshly criticize the remake. *Kong*'s initial performances lacked polish and deviated too much from the formula of the 1959 original for many Johannesburg theatergoers, both white and black.

Whereas some critics attacked the play's new script, "updated" score and lack of polish, it appears that the black public proved more willing to accept the alterations

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<sup>74</sup> Sepamla, "King Kong," *S'ketsh*, Winter 1979, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Rina Minervini, "A defeat for comeback Kong," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 26, 1979.

enacted by Walker and Dinroe-Walker, as they made up a disproportionate percentage of the play's audience during its brief run. "Since that [opening] night very few whites, coloureds and Indians have attended the show. The audience has been mainly black, an average of about 150 people a night," observed one critic, "with a predictable but not spectacular increase on Fridays and Saturdays."<sup>76</sup>

On the whole, black critics and black audiences presumably identified the need for this *King Kong* to reflect a post-Soweto Uprising generation and therefore a revising of Dlamini's story, rather than a mere remake of the 1959 original.<sup>77</sup> Recognizing the differences between the eras of the 1950s and 1970s, *Drum* magazine claimed that "[t]he first difference that emerged (word is illegible) from the crowd was that unlike their parents, the new generation did not regard King Kong as a thug, a bad boy or a mean somebody. No. But as another victim of the socio-political set up of his days."<sup>78</sup>

These audiences too, however, possessed reservations about this production. One key contention for African critics lay in the inclusion of, in the words of *Drum*, "too many 'Ipi Tombi' scenes," which implied an over-romanticizing of rural life as well as the inclusion of too many "tribal" dance numbers.<sup>79</sup> This imagery of "merry Africa" occurring in rural areas like the Bantustans was something that urban Africans were quite

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<sup>76</sup> Bob Hitchcock, "The King Kong players are singing it again," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.

<sup>77</sup> Since the apartheid state cracked down on the black newspapers and magazines following the uprisings and political instability that took place throughout the 1970s, fewer black periodicals existed by 1979 and thus I admittedly face a limited number of black "voices" to counter those from the white press. With this said, black periodicals did exist at the time of the *Kong* remake, such as *Drum* magazine and *S'ketsh*.

<sup>78</sup> Review of *King Kong*, *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1979, 96-7.

<sup>79</sup> Review of *King Kong*, *Drum* (Johannesburg), June 1979, 97.



familiar with. Unfortunately, it echoed the depiction of Africa promoted by the apartheid state in its justification of its “separate development” policies. By presenting Africans as inherently rural tribal beings, the state rationalized vindicated its brutal treatment of Africans, particularly those residing in the “white” cities. In her witness of the 1979 *King Kong*, Esmé Matshikiza herself wondered if the remake was somehow financially backed by the apartheid regime or the Bantustans due to this romanticizing of rural life.<sup>80</sup> Hence it is through these divergent conceptions of “Africa” that one realizes the cultural disconnects between South Africans and the African diaspora.

As if the horrid opening night reviews were not bad fortune enough, Esmé Matshikiza soon accused Ian Bernhardt of breaching his contract with her concerning the use of her late husband’s music.<sup>81</sup> As Todd Matshikiza’s widow, she controlled the rights to his music, and allowed Bernhardt’s production to use his music provided, according to the *Rand Daily Mail*, “no changes [to his score] were made without her consent.” After being “appalled” by the opening night performance, Matshikiza demanded that *King Kong* “[s]top this travesty of my late husband’s work.” Compounding matters further, other composers’ music was being used in the play and being credited to Todd Matshikiza.<sup>82</sup>

Due to its failure to impress mainstream audiences and press, the Walker-led remake floundered. By the third night of production, it reportedly performed to “a 10 % capacity house” and “[a] number of people were seen walking out during the second-half

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<sup>80</sup> Author’s personal conversation with Esmé Matshikiza, August 2006.

<sup>81</sup> “KO King Kong, says irate widow,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April, 27, 1979.

<sup>82</sup> “KO King Kong, says irate widow,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April, 27, 1979.

of the performance.”<sup>83</sup> Frustrated by *Kong*’s lack of success, their white critics and the general reaction to their work by South African audiences, both Walkers simply left the country with little prior notice and returned to the US leaving behind the unpopular production. They did, however, provide a letter of resignation thanking the play’s organizers “for the chance to see for ourselves what South African prejudice is all about.”<sup>84</sup>

While *King Kong*’s bombing at the box office translated into major losses on the part of the play’s investors, its downfall seems to have sold papers, as the press flocked to cover nearly every aspect of its demise, which perhaps further demonstrates the original’s lasting legacy within South African popular culture. These news stories detailing the remake’s failure, often interrogating what exactly went wrong, appeared in print (and often on the front pages) significantly after the Walkers returned to the United States. The *Rand Daily Mail*, for instance, published two stories and a lure to a larger story inside the paper on its front pages. A *Sunday Times* advertisement even asked, “Can the musical that flopped lift itself up again?”<sup>85</sup> One article, entitled “Anatomy of a FLOP,” labeled this failed remake as “one of the costliest flops in South African theatrical history.” It further added, “[T]he original show was a moneyspinner which captured the

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<sup>83</sup> Ingrid Norton, “Second sorry night for ‘King Kong,’” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 28, 1979.

<sup>84</sup> Len Ashton, “Anatomy of a FLOP,” *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), April 29, 1979.

<sup>85</sup> Ingrid Norton, “Second sorry night for ‘King Kong,’” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 28, 1979.

imagination of the nation. Now the costly 1979 version is tottering under an avalanche of critical insults and legal threats. What went wrong?”<sup>86</sup>

Volleys of attacks were exchanged throughout the local papers on behalf of virtually all parties involved—but particularly Walker and Bernhardt—declaring which was to blame for the remake’s failures. “The crux of the matter,” stated Bernhardt, “is that Joe Walker failed to realize his grandeur ideas. He undoubtedly is a big talent, but in Johannesburg he was not amenable to reason and ultimately became impossible to deal with because he made production promises he was unable to fulfill.”<sup>87</sup> Heaping blame on both Walkers, Bernhardt further disclosed that he was “delighted they walked out” because he intended on suing both Walkers for breach of contract.<sup>88</sup>

It appears that the press specifically piled on Walker for various reasons. He was a foreigner and an outsider, a visible drunk, and a self-proclaimed racist. Furthermore he was by now out of the country and thus could not be reached daily to defend himself.<sup>89</sup> “Egocentric tantrums, drinking bouts and racialistic tirades made the last few weeks of rehearsals a nightmare for the producers and cast of ‘King Kong,’” remarked the *Rand Daily Mail*.<sup>90</sup> Identifying Walker as “the man who created the nightmare,” one report claimed that Walker “[t]ook over a dressing room at His Majesty’s Theatre, ordered

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<sup>86</sup> Len Ashton, “Anatomy of a FLOP,” *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), April 29, 1979.

<sup>87</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “‘King Kong’ went all wrong,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 7, 1979.

<sup>88</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “The King Kong players are singing it again,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.

<sup>89</sup> Though Walker did have some contact with the press and did release an interview concerning his experience as *Kong*’s director to the *Sunday Times*, he was not nearly as accessible to the local press as Bernhardt or the *Kong* investors.

<sup>90</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “Why King Kong was knocked out,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannebsurg), May 3, 1979.

alcohol and spent up to two hours at a time drinking during rehearsals;" he "[i]gnored calls for consultations and when he did arrive on stage or in the stalls, he was slurring so badly he called on others to give directions;" he "[s]houted and swore at the cast with such venom that the performers became inhibited and afraid of him;" he "[r]ejected advice from anyone bold enough to give it," and "[f]orced well-known costume designer Ruth St Moritz and show promoter Malanie Millin to quit."<sup>91</sup> Despite this litany of abuses, Walker's alcoholism was considered by his detractors to be the main reason both for his inability to produce a hit and for the play's downfall. "When I pointed out that his drinking was damaging the production," one investor informed the press, "he accused me of being a white amateur who never should be involved in the theatre."<sup>92</sup>

Though these critics, Bernhardt and the *Kong* investors were apt to highlight Walker's drunkenness and often blamed it for his dismal performance, it seems that all parties, particularly Bernhardt, should have known of the problem prior to his hiring. Walker's alcoholism was not a recent development, and seems to have long been a problem for him. A 1972 biographical story published in the *New York Times* quoted him as saying, "He [Walker's father] did die of acute alcoholism at 58 and if I'm not careful I may just follow in his footsteps... I love the taste and feel of booze."<sup>93</sup> The story further added that "Walker usually starts the day with a shot of rum and he drank quietly and

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<sup>91</sup> Bob Hitchcock, "Why King Kong was knocked out," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 3, 1979.

<sup>92</sup> Bob Hitchcock, "'King Kong' went all wrong," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 7, 1979.

<sup>93</sup> Patricia Bosworth, "'We Start Out Loving Everybody,'" *New York Times* (New York), December 31, 1972.

steadily throughout our talk...”<sup>94</sup> However, it should be noted that this story appeared at the height of *Niger*’s success and thus Walker was presumably a functioning alcoholic; his drunkenness alone probably cannot be to blame for his failure to meet Bernhardt’s expectations.

### **Remaking a Remake**

With the Walkers back in the United States and in desperation to salvage the project, Bernhardt, demonstrating his knack for showmanship and promotional savvy, used the media attention concerning the controversies surrounding the show to declare that changes were being made, such as “tighten[ing] and shorten[ing] the show.” Throughout these articles, he announced that he sought to move more towards the 1959 version, striving “to restore the original music.”<sup>95</sup> It must be further noted that the fact that *King Kong* could be remade yet again is far less remarkable than that local critics were convinced to review the production for a second time. This point is a testament to the connections that Bernhardt established through his years producing and promoting entertainment acts since the mid-1950s. Acknowledging this “rare move in showbiz in South Africa,” a critic noted, “producer Bernhardt has appealed to critics of Johannesburg’s major newspapers to take a second look at his show.”<sup>96</sup> While this point

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<sup>94</sup> Patricia Bosworth, “‘We Start Out Loving Everybody,’” *New York Times* (New York), December 31, 1972.

<sup>95</sup> Ingrid Norton, “Second sorry night for ‘King Kong,’” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 28, 1979.

<sup>96</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “The King Kong players are singing it again,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.

should be seen as a result of Bernhardt's standing in South African show business, one wonders if local critics would have been willing to again review the production had it been any production other than the renowned *King Kong*.

In hopes of appeasing overly critical members from local black theatre circles, Bernhardt named Corney Mabaso director, who was ultimately charged with resurrecting the endeavor (albeit with the help of Bernhardt and others). Instead of starting from scratch or returning to Bloom's book, the remake's remake followed much of Walker's vision.<sup>97</sup> Remarking on her continued discontent with the production, one critic stated, "I still don't like Joseph Walker's book. It saddles the performers with some literally unspeakable lines and removes the folk hero King Kong from the wildness that makes his downfall inevitable."<sup>98</sup>

Despite retaining most of Walker's script, the Mabaso-led production actively sought to bring the 1979 production closer to the original's format. In particular, the *Rand Daily Mail* noted that Mabaso-directed production reverted "back to being specifically an urban story, which it was intended to be."<sup>99</sup> Though far from perfect, Mabaso proved more knowledgeable and aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of the cast and crew, which was presumably due to his familiarity with most of them prior to production. This was evident to reviewers, personified by one reviewer claiming: "In a cleaner production we can see and enjoy touches that were lost before. Most of the

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<sup>97</sup> It remains unclear if Mabaso's choice was due to time constraints or if he considered Walker's book superior to Bloom's version.

<sup>98</sup> Rina Minervini, "Now we've got a show," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 9, 1979.

<sup>99</sup> Bob Hitchcock, "The King Kong players are singing it again," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.

members of the large cast contribute something specific somewhat along the line. Now the talent shows.”<sup>100</sup> Despite these changes being noted and applauded, the Mabaso-led production lacked the time needed to address all of the production’s weaknesses.<sup>101</sup>

Whereas the production itself retained large portions of Joseph Walker’s vision, Dinroe-Walker’s music was predominantly cut by Duku Makane—her replacement as music director—who reincorporated Todd Matshikiza’s original score, and restored many of the shortened songs to their entirety.<sup>102</sup> On the whole, reviewers enjoyed the return to a stricter interpretation of Matshikiza’s music, which in the words of one reviewer, “is back, recognizable and so welcome” and “a comforting reassurance that we haven’t wandered into the wrong theatre.”<sup>103</sup> These revisions, however, failed to fully appease many white critics desiring a complete return to the 1959 format.

Though this rejuvenated *Kong* was better received than the Walker-directed version, reviews remained far from glowing. Though some applauded the musical’s return to its original format,<sup>104</sup> others believed that the production had “changed [from] an incoherent disaster into an entertainment—in less than two weeks,” and “it’s now got more than a fighting chance.”<sup>105</sup> Sensing that the play could not be turned into a hit, however, Bernhardt showed hesitancy and reportedly the play “was now being reviewed

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<sup>100</sup> Rina Minervini, “Now we’ve got a show,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 9, 1979.

<sup>101</sup> Rina Minervini, “Now we’ve got a show,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 9, 1979.

<sup>102</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “The King Kong players are singing it again,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.

<sup>103</sup> Rina Minervini, “Now we’ve got a show,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 9, 1979.

<sup>104</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “The King Kong players are singing it again,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.

<sup>105</sup> Rina Minervini, “Now we’ve got a show,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 9, 1979.

on a weekly basis, and [this production, as a result] might not see out the two months it was originally booked to run.”<sup>106</sup> While acknowledging the gains made by the Mabaso-led production, it still strayed too far from the 1959 original for the liking of some reviewers. A *Rand Daily Mail* critic concluded her review, “[M]ay I put in a special plea to change the distracting Martha Graham-type poses that accompany the rural love scene? In this context they make no sense at all.”<sup>107</sup>

Sensing the need for the remake to wow critics as well as audiences, one critic asserted:

How theatre critics of Johannesburg’s major white newspapers and magazines are reacting to the revamped post-Walker version this week will determine whether the show will continue its run at His Majesty’s and go on to play at other theatres in the main centres of South Africa.

If it’s “thumbs-up” all round, producer Bernhardt and investor Gardy believe that the show will turn into a smash-hit with the prospects of an overseas tour on the cards.

But if the white critics give the “thumbs-down” it could kill these ambitions and the likelihood is that the revived “King Kong” would then end up in relative obscurity on the black township circuit.<sup>108</sup>

Though not necessarily receiving “thumbs-down,” the Kong remake even with Mabaso’s and Bernhardt’s changes did not receive the “thumbs-up” necessary for it to keep going. In the end, *Kong* closed down only a few days after its premiere, and ended up as this critic almost prophetically predicted, “in relative obscurity.” But, this “relative obscurity” did not come on “the black township circuit.” Rather, it came through the remake’s place within South African popular memory, where it is largely forgotten.

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<sup>106</sup> Ingrid Norton, “Second sorry night for ‘King Kong,’” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), April 28, 1979.

<sup>107</sup> Rina Minervini, “Now we’ve got a show,” *Rand Daily Mail*, May 9, 1979 (Johannesburg).

<sup>108</sup> Bob Hitchcock, “The King Kong players are singing it again,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), May 10, 1979.



## Conclusion

Following this disastrous remake of *King Kong* and his return to America, Walker produced little and also receded into “relative obscurity.” Though he wrote “District Line,” which debuted in December 1984,<sup>109</sup> a *New York Times* critic labels the play “a mess—albeit a peppery well-acted mess.” It is significant in that one of its characters, Zilikazi, demonstrates links to Walker’s South African experience and affinity for the anti-apartheid struggle. As the play unfolds, Zilikazi turns out to be, in Rich’s words, “a busy operative in South Africa’s anti-apartheid underground.”<sup>110</sup> Walker’s inclusion of an anti-apartheid activist possibly demonstrates that it was not black South Africans who Walker held responsible for *Kong*’s failure, and that Walker’s own support for the anti-apartheid movement continued despite the lack of acceptance of his version of *King Kong*.

In a 1973 *New York Times* article, “Broadway’s Vitality Is Black Vitality,” Walker contended:

We [African Americans] are too sophisticated to take all of America’s hypocrisy. For although I am a professor of speech and theatre, I still have not forgotten how to get on down to the nitty gritty! And if the fantasy makes my spiritual fingers pop, then I’m going to dig it! But if it gets too embroiled in the mire of inconsequential logic, then I’m going to cut it loose. Blacks will attend anything that moves them. And will not attend that which does not. How do I know? Because I’m black.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Though a much smaller production than *The River Niger*, the play included a young Samuel L. Jackson in the cast.

<sup>110</sup> Frank Rich, “Stage: ‘District Line,’ From Negro Ensemble,” *New York Times* (New York), December 5, 1984.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph A. Walker, “Broadway’s Vitality Is Black Vitality,” *New York Times* (New York), August 5, 1973.

Judging from *The River Niger*'s success, it appears that Walker did indeed know what black American audiences would enjoy. In the South African context, however, the question remains: did he know what sort of theatre South Africans, particularly black South Africans, would "dig"? Did the experiences of black South Africans and African Americans differ so much that their tastes were so dissimilar that Walker was incapable of shaping *King Kong* into his own vision while appeasing local audiences? Or perhaps was it that expectations of the white newspaper critics and theatergoers differ vastly from those of black South African audiences?

Judging from reported accounts of attendance, African theatergoers continued to support Walker's *Kong* despite the horrid reviews by white theatre critics, and thus it seems that the 1979 production did, at best, marginally appeal to local black audiences. It appears that the *Kong* production's collapse signifies where the interests of black and white audiences diverge. Whereas the original *King Kong* production offered a product that many whites had never seen before, white audiences may have been expecting a nearly exact replica of the original—and therefore would possibly resist any change to the musical that was just as much a part of their memories and heritage as it was for black audiences. If deviation was to be accepted, white audiences certainly expected changes more along the lines of white-written and produced "African" musicals, such as *Ipi Tombi*, and not ones that flaunted or celebrated black pride, which too closely resembled the 1970s Black Consciousness movement and African militancy that alienated whites regardless of political leaning. This black pride-laced version was inherently not the *Kong* that they desired, in that it failed to reproduce the images and memories spawned

by the original. Instead, it possibly reminded them of the present political instability and black backlash that their nation faced, which only served to alienate them.

While certainly deserving his fair share of the blame for the 1979 version's failure, it appears that Walker (as well as his wife) received a disproportionate amount of the condemnation for 1979 *Kong*'s failure. In the only published post-1979 examination of the musical, Andersson remarks that the Walkers' "involvement is generally seen as the reason for the flop of Kong II."<sup>112</sup> Bernhardt and the *Kong* investors, as well as the production's staff and cast, on the other hand, have therefore been historically absolved from their affiliation with the project and its ultimate collapse. It appears that this stems from a combination of Walker's desire to drastically alter a classic South African production, his sour attitude towards those involved, and the negative impression that he left due to his biting personality, his unbridled alcoholism and his status as an outsider to South Africa. By heaping blame on the Walkers, South Africans conveniently avoided both confronting one another and addressing the possibility that *King Kong* was indeed a play that fit well in an earlier era but could no longer be considered a timeless piece.

If the 1959 *Kong* arguably marked the launch of popular theater to black audiences, the 1979 version's failure did not mark the end of the boom in black theatre that was spurred on by the original's success. Though the 1959 version is credited as defining or jumpstarting the careers of its cast members, the Walker-Bernhardt production can only be classified as a blip or footnote that would rather be forgotten by all parties involved with it. Whereas virtually every bio on Sophie Mcgina, Miriam

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<sup>112</sup> Andersson, *Music in the Mix*, 102.

Makeba or Thandie Klaussen lauds their involvement with the original *Kong*, for instance, one is hard pressed to find any mention of Louw, Masinga or any other cast members' involvement in the 1979 *Kong*. The fact that few South Africans remember that this remake even took place further demonstrates the powerful legacy and memories associated with the 1959 *King Kong*. This failed attempt to recreate the original's success neither tarnished nor blemished the popular memory of the original in South Africans' eyes.

The demise of the *Kong* remake was perhaps ultimately more painful and damaging to African audiences than it had been to the white critics. A successful resurrection of *King Kong* could have conceivably ended the era of oppressive, racist and condescending (not to mention underpaying) "African" musicals of the *Ipi Tombi* ilk while promoting productions that better represented both the complexities and realities of African life under apartheid. Therefore this hope may partially explain why black South Africans made up a disproportionate percentage of the audience despite *Kong*'s putrid reviews. "It isn't because I disliked the new version very much that I write," added Sepamla in his review of the 1979 *King Kong* remake, "it is simply because I love the old KK so much. And I believe a third KK might still be mounted some day. You see I'm concerned with the aftermath of this one if it [the third one] does fail because I hope to God it doesn't."<sup>113</sup> Sepamla's review demonstrates the affinity towards *Kong* held by black audiences as well as captures the despair endured by them when this remake

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<sup>113</sup> Sepamla, "King Kong," *S'ketsh*, Winter 1979, 7.

flopped. Despite disliking the version, he did see a positive impact rising out of *Kong*'s collapse and concludes:

I admire the courage of those involved in the exercise to save KK. No art-lover can afford to gloat at this hour. For at stake is the viability of black theatre – never mind the blunder of the producers who tried to serve us ethnicity at all cost. Black theatre is at the crossroads and the success of this KK will ensure the risks necessary by other entrepreneurs. We want to celebrate KK once more because it is our standard bearer.

LONG LIVE KING KONG!<sup>114</sup>

For Sepamla and many other African fans of *King Kong*, the flop struck at the core of black theatre and epitomized the battles facing it throughout the 1970s. Like the legacy of *King Kong*, black theatre would “live” on despite criticism from white liberal audiences and the box office bombing of the remake itself. Joseph Walker's memory in South Africa, on the other hand, faded into history, and seems only remembered when a historian, such as myself, brings up his name. The overwhelming response by *King Kong* fans and cast members is still to curse him and his version of the production.

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<sup>114</sup> Sepamla, “King Kong,” *S'ketsh*, Winter 1979, 7.

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